

ZERO

Volume 1 - The Beginning

KUNWAR SURYA



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please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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Preface

Some stories are not meant to be told. They wait, hidden in the silence of time, until the right moment arrives—until someone dares to bring them to light. ZERO: The Beginning is one such story. It is not merely a tale, nor just a journey. It is a force—something that came uninvited into my life, reshaping every belief I once held about fate, destiny, and the unseen threads that weave our lives.

At first, I thought I was writing about a person. A mysterious person named Rana. But soon I understood that Rana is not just the subject of this book—he is its heartbeat. A being whose life defies explanation. From the day he was born, he has been surrounded by the unexplainable events that challenge the boundaries of what we call “real.” His story doesn’t simply bend the rules of logic—it tears them apart.

The deeper I ventured into his life, the more I realized something unsettling: I was not writing his story. His story was rewriting me. Every revelation, every truth he shared opened a door to something larger—something I could neither ignore nor fully comprehend. This is not just a biography. It is a map, a whisper, and perhaps even a warning.

Who is Rana? A messenger from realms we have long forgotten. I cannot give you answers—not yet. But I can promise you this: once you step into these pages, you will no longer be the same. There is something alive here, something that breathes between the words, waiting for you to find it.

This book is only the beginning of a saga that will span across volumes, each one revealing a layer of truths hidden beneath centuries of silence. As I wrote, I began to feel as if the story itself was guiding me—showing me glimpses of the future, testing my faith, and daring me to keep going. Perhaps it will do the same to you.

Be warned: these pages may awaken something inside you. You might start seeing patterns where none existed before, or feel a presence you can't explain. You may even wonder if you chose this book—or if this book has chosen you.

ZERO: The Beginning is not just meant to be read. It is meant to be experienced. To be whispered about. To be passed on, because the deeper you go, the more you'll realize that this isn't just a story—it's something beyond explanation.

Welcome to the world of ZERO - You've just taken the first step into a mystery that will follow you long after you close this book.

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Chapter 1

Origins



I was born into a royal family, where tradition, legacy, and honor were not just values, but the very air we breathed. Our mansion, in the very heart of the village stood like a sentinel of the past, a testament to generations of our family. The ancient stones whispered stories of the legacy we carried, and the massive pillars held up the weight of history itself. Time had barely touched the grand structure, its arched doorways and wide corridors bearing witness to an era long gone, yet alive within us.

The mansion was surrounded by expansive gardens, thick with wild, fragrant flowers, their scent hanging in the air. A towering iron gate stood at the entrance, creaking as it swung open to reveal the grand walkway, paved with stones that had been laid centuries before. The estate sat in isolation, atop a raised plateau, as though it were a kingdom unto itself. Dense forests surrounded it, with towering hills casting their shadows over us, giving the landscape a ghostly feel. At night, the wind howled through the trees, and the villagers'

whispered tales of spirits that wandered the hills, guarding the estate from unseen dangers.

A thin stream wound its way along the road that led out of the village, its gentle gurgle the only sound that broke the stillness. Eight kilometers away, a larger village thrived, connected to the world by a network of dirt roads, pathways worn down by generations of travelers, traders, and farmers. The road itself was a lifeline, weaving a network of stories and lives.

My family had lived in this small village for centuries, but after India gained independence, the ancestral property had begun to feel like a relic of a time gone by. My grandfather made the difficult decision to move our family to the larger village, where our family name and influence continued to grow. The new estate was vast, covering agricultural lands that stretched endlessly into the horizon. Two grand houses stood facing each other, separated by a wide expanse of open land. This space was more than just land; it was a symbol of our family's generosity, a space where villagers would gather and a common ground for the community.

The houses were imposing, built with the same care and precision as the mansion. Arched doorways led into vast rooms decorated with intricately carved furniture, vibrant tapestries, and walls painted with bold colors. Each room is a reflection of the person who inhabited it. Outside, the walls were white and grey, simple yet elegant, and inside, the rooms came alive with color, their vibrancy in stark contrast to the solemn facade.

In this larger village, our family's presence was felt everywhere. We were respected, even revered, not just for our royal lineage, but for the kindness and generosity that my grandparents embodied. My grandfather, Raja Bhaiya, Shri Virendra Singh, was the kind of man whose very presence commanded respect. He stood tall, his broad shoulders and thick moustache adding to his lion-like appearance. He was a freedom fighter, a man who had fought for India's independence, his name forever etched in the history of the struggle. His voice was deep and powerful, echoing in the halls of our estate and in the hearts of those who followed him.

"We owe this land nothing less than our blood," he would say, his voice steady and full of conviction as he addressed the family, his words were a promise, a reminder of our duty to the land and the people.

But if my grandfather was the strength, my grandmother was the soul. Rajeshwari Devi Singh, my beloved Mai-sa, was a force unlike any other. Standing at 5.4 feet, she carried herself with a grace and command that made her presence impossible to ignore. Her word was law. Not a single decision in the household was made without her final approval, and no one, not even her daughters-in-law, dared to challenge her. When she spoke, it was with an authority that came from more than just her status. Her presence alone silenced a room.

"Do not question what I have said," she would often say, her voice calm but unyielding. Her eyes, sharp and penetrating, left no room for debate. "Once I have spoken, it is done."

She was more than just a matriarch; she was a legend. Even in a time when women were expected to remain behind the curtains of the household, Mai-sa was different. She was athletic, with a strength that no one could match. No one dared challenge her, not in the village, nor in the surrounding areas. Her reputation had spread far and wide. She was trained in martial arts and sword fighting, her skills far exceeding the men in our family.

Stories of her bravery were told for generations including how she had once fought off a wild leopard that had ventured too close to the estate, or the time she had single-handedly taken down a group of dacoits who had threatened the village. Even the fiercest criminals trembled at the sound of her name. They knew better than to cross paths with Rajeshwari Devi Singh.

Her beauty was undeniable, but it was her strength that truly defined her. She ruled our home with an iron fist, but beneath her stern exterior lay a heart that cared deeply for her family. She spoke little, but her actions spoke volumes. It was said that no woman in the village could rival her stamina or endurance. Even in her sixties, she moved like a warrior, her body still capable of feats that would leave men half her age in awe.

“You are the blood of warriors,” she would remind us, her eyes scanning over the family during meals. “Do not forget where you come from, or the sacrifices that have been made for you.” Her words hung in the air like a command from the gods themselves. Disobedience was not an option.

I was mesmerized by her. Everyone was. To see her was to understand true strength, the kind that transcended physical power. She carried the weight of the family, of our history, on her shoulders, and yet she never faltered. Even when the burden was heavy, she stood tall.

My grandfather, though equally formidable, balanced her sternness with warmth. Where she was the iron, he was the flame, bringing light and warmth to the family. Together, they were the embodiment of the values that had been passed down to us for generations—strength, resilience, and compassion.

Their influence stretched far beyond the walls of our estate. Villagers from miles away would come to seek their guidance, and no one left empty-handed. Whether it was a kind word from my grandfather or a quiet act of generosity from my grandmother, their impact was lasting.

“This family does not stand on wealth alone,” my grandfather would often remark, as he offered food and clothes to the less fortunate. “We stand on the respect and love of the people.”

It was this balance of power and kindness, this unshakeable foundation of love and duty, that made our family what it was. Our heritage was not just a story to be told; it was alive in the very walls of our homes, in the hearts of the people, and in every breath we took.

My grandfather was a man of immense principles, one whose love for his motherland ran so deep that he refused the title of “freedom fighter” bestowed upon him after India’s independence. For him, serving the country was not

something to be celebrated, not something that demanded recognition or rewards—it was a duty, an honor for him. He believed that nothing was owed to him for doing what he considered his highest obligation. His service to the motherland, whether in the heat of conflict or in times of peace, was carried out with quiet humility, as natural as breathing.

“Why should I accept this?” he would say, whenever someone offered him praise or admiration for his sacrifices during the freedom movement. “We did what had to be done. India is free now, and that is the ultimate reward.”

Even in the years following independence, when many freedom fighters’ families received privileges and benefits from the government, my grandfather refused to seek such entitlements. He was a man who instilled in his children the idea that whatever they aspired to in life, they should aim high—but remain firmly rooted in the soil of humility.

“You are no different from those villagers who toil every day to survive,” he would tell his children, his voice firm but full of wisdom. “We are all the same. If we are blessed with power or wealth, it is our duty to serve the needy, not to rule over them. Power without responsibility is the mark of a tyrant, not a protector.”

His words shaped the very core of our family’s values. In our household, leadership wasn’t about dominion, it was about service. Responsibility was woven into our bloodline, passed down with the same gravity as our name.

My grandfather donated nearly every penny he had to India’s freedom struggle, leaving no stone unturned in his

efforts. He believed deeply in the cause and ensured his sacrifices would pave the way for the next generation to build a new empire dedicated to serving the nation once more.

Though he once had significant resources at his disposal, he never permitted his children to depend solely on inheritance. For him, wealth held no true value without personal worth and integrity. He insisted that each generation must earn its own place, proving their worth through meaningful actions and not simply relying on inheritance.

My father often recounted the stories of their childhood struggles, painting vivid pictures of a time when life was far from easy. “We had no fancy clothes,” he would say, his voice both nostalgic and tinged with pride. “No toys. Some nights, we went to bed with empty stomachs.” But there was no resentment in his voice—only acceptance, as though those hardships had been as natural as the seasons changing.

“We learned early on that hard work wasn’t a choice,” my father would say, “it was a necessity. There were no shortcuts.”

Their schooldays were no less challenging. Each morning, they would set off on foot, their journey taking them four long kilometers, cutting through a dense, foreboding forest. The forest was alive with mystery, the thick trees and underbrush whispering secrets to those brave enough to pass through. At times, strange sounds would echo from the depths of the trees—mysterious howls, the rustling of unseen creatures—making the journey one filled with fear and determination.

“There were days,” my father would say, “when we ran through those woods as fast as we could. It felt like the trees themselves were alive, watching us, waiting.”

But even the fear of the forest was nothing compared to the rigor of the school, where the teachers were known for their strictness.

“They didn’t hesitate to use the cane,” my father recalled, his voice softening. “One mistake, and you’d feel it on your back. But in the end, that tough love, that discipline, is what pushed us to succeed.”

It was that same discipline, that same hard-earned strength, that shaped my father and his siblings into the people they would become. They weren’t handed success on a silver platter; they were made to earn it, to fight for it. They knew, deeply, that their struggles were not a punishment but a lesson. One that my grandfather insisted upon.

“You must earn your place in this world,” my grandfather would remind them. “You cannot tarnish the legacy of those who came before you by expecting the world to fall at your feet.”

And earn it, they did. His children, knowing the weight of the family name, went on to serve the country. Most of them joined the defence services, carrying forward the tradition of sacrifice and duty. Their pride wasn’t in the medals they wore, but in the knowledge that they were living up to the principles their father had laid before them.

But my father took a different path. He did not join the military, though the call of duty was in his blood just the same. Instead, he carved out his own journey, becoming a state government officer, earning his place through his own merit.

“I wanted to serve differently,” my father would explain, his voice always steady when recounting his choices. “My

brothers served the country with guns and uniforms. I serve through policy and governance. But we serve all the same.”

Even though my father’s path diverged from the military traditions of his brothers, he never once strayed from the values instilled in him by my grandfather. Humility, responsibility, and hard work were the cornerstones of his life.

Through it all, my grandfather’s vision remained clear: legacy is not a shield to hide behind. “Our family’s name is not a shield,” my grandfather once told me, his eyes sharp with the wisdom of a man who had seen more than his fair share of battles—both physical and moral. “It is a beacon. It lights the way for those who come after us, but it does not carry them.

” In our family, relationships were like intricate threads, woven tightly together, creating a web of deep connections, loyalty, and hidden tensions. My father had two sisters—Revati and Mithila—and four brothers, each of whom were married. The women of the family, my aunts, formed a complex tapestry of personalities, each distinct but intertwined under the vast roof of our family mansion.

At the head of the women stood Savitri, the eldest of my aunts. Tall, fair, and graceful, Savitri had an aura of almost ethereal calmness about her. There was something angelic in her demeanor. She never raised her voice, and yet, her mere presence in the room was enough to command respect. When Savitri spoke—even in a whisper—everyone listened. Her words carried the weight of gold.

“It’s not necessary to shout to be heard,” she once told me in a rare moment of conversation, her voice soft but firm.

“The loudest voices are often the weakest. Strength lies in control.”

Next was Gomti, a stark contrast to Savitri. Gomti was the fire. Her wheatish complexion matched her earthy nature, full of life and energy. She was the life of any gathering, her words flowing like a river, quick and endless. Sometimes, her need to dominate conversations would overwhelm those around her, but no one could ignore her. Her laugh echoed through the mansion, bright and boisterous, filling every corner with her presence.

“What is life without a little noise?” she would often say, laughing heartily as she gestured dramatically. “You have to make people notice you!” That was Gomti—always noticed, always vibrant.

Then there was Sumitra, her elegance subtle and refined. Fair-skinned, with a poised demeanor, she carried herself with a grace that did not demand attention but drew admiration in quiet, understated ways. Her thoughts were progressive, her approach to life modern, but it never came at the cost of her tradition. She embodied sophistication, and while others in the household often found themselves swept up in chaos, Sumitra moved with calm precision.

“It’s not what you say, but how you say it,” she once told me, her voice gentle as she adjusted her perfectly draped sari. “In a world full of noise, grace is the only way to rise above.” Sumitra’s quiet wisdom was something I admired deeply.

But then, there was Damayanti. The youngest of the aunts, and perhaps the most complex of them all. Darker in complexion, with sharp, chiseled features, she was beautiful,

but her beauty was overshadowed by something far more dangerous—her cunning. Damayanti was sharp in mind, always calculating, always one step ahead. Her manipulative nature was like a silent storm that brewed beneath the surface, unseen but ever-present.

She harbored a deep resentment toward my mother, an envy that festered over the years. It wasn't a simple jealousy, not the kind born from fleeting comparisons. It was deeper, more poisonous, rooted in years of feeling overlooked in a household where beauty and grace were valued above all.

"She thinks she's so perfect, doesn't she?" Damayanti would say, her voice laced with bitterness, her eyes narrowing whenever my mother's name came up. "But one day, her perfection will crumble. Mark my words."

Her words were always spoken with a venomous undertone, her plots simmering beneath her calm exterior. Over time, Damayanti became the most devious of them all, always two steps ahead, always finding ways to sow discord without ever revealing her hand. She knew how to twist words, how to manipulate emotions, and how to influence others while remaining in the shadows.

"You think you can escape this, but you can't," she would whisper, a sly smile on her lips. "I always get what I want."

Despite her quiet scheming, she had an undeniable presence in the family—one that I had to confront time and time again. And yet, as much as she tried to pull me down, as much as she threw obstacles in my path, it was her challenges that shaped me the most.

“People like Damayanti, the ones who wish you ill, often end up being your greatest teachers,” I would later reflect, a bitter smile on my lips. “Every plot, every challenge, every confrontation made me stronger. In a way, I owe her a sense of gratitude.” It’s ironic—those who try to break you, often end up being the ones who build you.

Life under this shared roof was anything but simple. The power struggles, the jealousies, and the unspoken rivalries hummed beneath the surface like a constant current. But amidst it all, I learned the most valuable lesson: adversity doesn’t break you; it builds you.

The house itself felt like a living entity, with its wide corridors and arched windows. Every creak of the wooden floors was a reminder of the weight of history. And under that roof, love and rivalry lived side by side. “Family is complicated,” my father would say, a sigh escaping his lips as he looked out at the gardens, reflecting on the tangled web of relationships that made up our home. “But no matter how much we fight, we remain tied to one another. That’s the burden—and the blessing—of blood.”

Savitri’s calm presence, Gomti’s boundless energy, Sumitra’s quiet grace, and Damayanti’s simmering envy—together, they created a delicate balance, a dance of personalities that often clashed but never truly broke.

And through it all, I stood at the edge of yet another chapter in my life, realizing that every moment—good or bad—was part of a greater design, shaping me for whatever lay ahead. Our family wasn’t just complex in size, but in the

intricate dance of relationships, where love, loyalty, rivalry, and betrayal coexisted in a delicate balance.

My father, Devendra Singh, was a man whose presence was felt long before he entered a room. Towering at just below 6 feet, with a wheatish complexion and an athletic build, he carried with him an air of authority that resonated through the very ground he walked on. His demeanor was stern, almost severe, and ensured that even the boldest individuals would think twice before crossing his path.

“Singh Sahab is coming,” villagers would whisper to one another, their voices tinged with both fear and respect. It was enough to send the children scattering from the streets, leaving a deafening silence in his wake. Even my cousins—Aunt Savitri’s sons and daughters, who were between seven and eleven when my father got married—would shrink in fear whenever they heard his heavy footsteps approaching.

“He’s here!” they would mutter under their breath, running to hide behind pillars or slipping quietly out of the room. To them, he was an unyielding disciplinarian, a figure who appeared to have been sent to keep them in line.

And they weren’t wrong. My father’s eyes were sharp, the kind that cut through any pretensions, making anyone under his gaze feel as though their deepest thoughts were being read. There was something about his stare that made even the most confident individual shift uncomfortably, unsure of what he saw, but certain he saw something.

“He doesn’t need to say much,” one of the villagers once told me, a nervous laugh escaping their lips. “You just know

when he's watching. It's like he's always a step ahead of everyone else."

It was true. My father wasn't one to waste words. When he did speak, his voice was measured, deliberate, and each syllable was laden with meaning. People would lean in, listening carefully, as though they feared missing something important. His silence was just as powerful as his speech—in fact, sometimes even more so. His stern demeanor left no room for argument, and when he issued an order, people followed without question.

But it wasn't just fear that commanded this respect. It was also the deep sense of integrity he carried. As a government officer, my father's honesty was legendary. His principles were carved in stone, and he adhered to a moral code so strict that it allowed for no shortcuts, no compromises.

"You cannot build a life on lies," he would often say, his voice calm but firm. "Truth may be hard, but it is the only thing that holds."

That unwavering commitment to truth drew both admiration and fear from those around him. His honesty was feared by those who hoped to deceive, and admired by those who sought to learn. He held no patience for dishonesty, and those who tried to fool him often found themselves caught before they even had the chance to lie.

Yet, behind that intimidating exterior, was a man of immense wisdom and profound love. His strictness wasn't born from cruelty, but from a deep belief that without boundaries, there could be no growth. His love was never overt, never expressed in soft words or gentle gestures.

Instead, it came through in the lessons he taught, in the values he upheld, and in the silent expectations he placed upon me and those around him.

“Strength is not in power,” he once told me, as we walked through the fields on a late afternoon, the sun setting behind him like a glowing halo. “Strength is in self-control. It’s easy to dominate others but much harder to control yourself.”

. He believed in shaping us through his actions, teaching me through his own example that true power lay not in dominance, but in self-discipline, in respecting others, and in upholding honor above all else.

“A man who cannot control himself,” he would say, “is no man at all.”

This code was something he expected everyone around him to follow—especially his children. He didn’t tolerate laziness, excuses, or half-hearted efforts. For him, excellence wasn’t optional; it was a necessity. And he made sure we understood that.

“If you don’t do something right the first time,” he said to me once when I was young, his eyes steady and his tone unwavering, “then don’t bother doing it at all.”

But it wasn’t just discipline for the sake of it. There was wisdom beneath his sternness, a quiet understanding of the world that ran deeper than I could fully comprehend at the time. He saw things others didn’t, and his ability to read situations, to anticipate problems before they arose, was something I would only come to appreciate later.

He molded me, shaped me with his uncompromising values, and though there were times when I resented his harshness, I look back now and realize that every lesson, every rule, every word of advice was his way of preparing me for a world that wouldn't be kind.

And despite his intimidating presence, his heart was full of love, though it was a love expressed in ways that weren't immediately obvious. His love was in the sacrifices he made, in the example he set, in the quiet ways he watched over me.

"I don't need to tell you what you already know," he said once when I asked him why he never said the words. "Love isn't in words, it's in actions."

He was right. My father was never one for sentiment, but his actions spoke louder than any declaration of love ever could. He taught me what it meant to be a man, to be someone who others could trust, who others could follow, and to hold my own integrity above all else.

His lessons are still with me, guiding my every decision, reminding me that true power is found not in ruling over others, but in the quiet mastery of oneself.

In stark contrast to my father's stern, commanding presence stood my mother - Devika Singh. A woman whose beauty and grace were almost otherworldly. At seventeen, when she married into the family, she looked nothing less than a goddess from an ancient tale. She had the appearance of someone who had stepped out of the pages of a forgotten myth. Even now, at fifty, time had been gentle with her, leaving her elegance and allure undiminished. It was as though nature itself had decided to preserve her youthful

beauty, almost as though the universe couldn't bear to let the world forget how radiant she had always been.

Her fair complexion glowed with a soft light, as though she were lit from within. Whenever people saw her, they would often remark in awed tones, "Even the purest milk pales in comparison to the brightness of her skin." There was a luminosity about her, a divine glow that made others pause in admiration. Her almond-shaped eyes, wide and deep, held an unspoken wisdom, as though she could peer into the very depths of your soul with just one glance. "She has the eyes of someone who has lived many lives," someone once said, and I remember thinking how true it was.

Those eyes, framed by long, dark lashes, held a kindness that could soften even the hardest of hearts. There was strength in her gaze, but also a tenderness that made you feel as though you were safe in her presence, as though she could see the best parts of you even when you couldn't see them yourself. Her face, with its broad, regal forehead, was the very picture of grace. The simple addition of a bindi on her forehead transformed her into the embodiment of the goddess Lakshmi—quite, nurturing, and powerful in her quiet strength.

Her hair, a flowing river of jet-black silk, cascaded down her back, catching the sunlight in ways that made it shimmer. Whether loose or tied in a simple braid, her hair complemented the effortless poise she carried in every movement. Standing at 5.5 feet, her slender frame gave her an almost ethereal presence, but beneath that delicate exterior was an undeniable inner strength, one that made you feel she could withstand anything the world threw at her.

I often remember how she would move through the house, draped in her soft-hued sarees, as though they were woven from clouds themselves. Whether in gentle shades of white or baby pink, the sarees felt like they were made for her, perfectly complementing her form and enhancing her aura of purity. She never sought attention, and yet wherever she went, all eyes would inevitably follow. It was her gentle presence, the grace with which she moved, the quiet joy she radiated, like a warm, golden light.

“She’s like the moon,” I once heard someone say during a family gathering. “You can’t help but watch her, even when she’s silent.”

But my mother’s beauty wasn’t just skin-deep. It manifested in her very essence. There was an innate warmth in her presence, a quiet joy that filled the room, even when she said nothing at all. Her laughter, soft and melodious like the ringing of temple bells, had the power to bring peace to anyone lucky enough to hear it.

“Do you hear that?” I remember my father saying once, his voice unusually soft as he paused to listen to her laugh from across the courtyard. “That sound... it’s the sound of home.”

Even her voice carried a sweetness that could soothe the most restless heart. I recall how she would sit with me when I was younger, gently brushing my hair while telling me stories of the gods and heroes from ancient times. Her voice was like honey, rich and comforting, wrapping around me like a protective embrace.

“There is a strength in gentleness,” she would say, her words never rushed, always thoughtful. “Never mistake

softness for weakness. The quietest forces are often the most powerful.”

That’s who she was—gentle, yet undeniably strong. Even now, when she stands at the window, her eyes gazing far into the distance, she seems less like a human and more like a celestial being, observing the world with a quiet, knowing smile. If angels could feel envy, I’m certain they would envy my mother’s beauty, her grace, and the gentle light that radiates from within her.

My mother was never one for excess. Her beauty was natural, and she had no need for adornment. But on those rare occasions when she dressed up for a family function or religious ceremony, she became the very picture of divine femininity. I remember one such event when she draped herself in a soft, silk saree of deep crimson, her hair adorned with fresh jasmine flowers.

“You look like the goddess Lakshmi,” I whispered, overcome by her radiance, as she stood in front of the mirror, adjusting her bindi. She smiled at me through the reflection, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“No, my child,” she replied, her voice soft but full of wisdom. “Every woman carries the goddess within her. It’s not about how you look, but how you live.”

That was my mother’s lesson to me—that beauty and strength weren’t about appearances, but about the way you carried yourself, the way you treated others. She taught me that true grace was not in perfection, but in the ability to move through life with dignity and compassion, no matter what challenges you faced.

Together, my parents represented two sides of a coin. My father, with his strict discipline and firm hand, and my mother, with her gentle grace and quiet strength. Where my father taught me about responsibility and honor, my mother taught me about love and compassion. Their contrasting personalities created a perfect balance in my life, and it was from both of them that I learned the lessons that shaped me into who I am today.

My father once said, “Your mother may be the gentlest soul I know, but make no mistake—she is the backbone of this family. Without her, everything would fall apart.”

And he was right. My mother’s strength was quiet, but it was the foundation of our home. It was her laughter that filled the empty spaces, her kindness that soothed our worries, and her grace that held us together through every storm.

“Strength and beauty are one and the same,” my mother had said once, as she looked out over the fields from our window. “You’ll understand that one day.”

And I did.

Chapter 2

The Omen

My mother's pregnancy was filled with challenges far beyond what anyone could have anticipated. The only thing certain was that she was expecting; everything else was a whirlwind of events, a storm swirling around her, almost as though the forces of the universe themselves were conspiring. I, the child destined for something greater, was meant to make my way into this world, but she would not face this journey alone.

Even before I was conceived, strange and inexplicable events began to unfold around her, leaving her confused and deeply frightened. Whispers spread through the village—old superstitions gathering like dark clouds on the horizon.

One such incident, involving a local madman, would forever be remembered by our family. It was an ordinary afternoon when my mother, barely 17 years old, still newly married and full of youthful innocence, sat in the garden of the estate with her attendants. The sun was casting its warm glow across the lawns, dappling the ground with patches of light and shade.

My mother and her attendants chatted casually, laughter flowing through the air, when suddenly, a figure appeared, moving erratically, like a shadow out of place.

"What is that?" one of the attendants gasped, her eyes wide with fear.

The figure drew closer, and they could see it was the local madman, known throughout the village as Lalu, a man who had wandered aimlessly for years, speaking in nonsensical murmurs, his mind long lost to the winds. But today, something about him was different. His movements were wild, but his eyes—they were fixed, unwavering, staring at my mother with an intensity that made the attendants' hearts race.

"Lalu! Stay back!" one of the attendants shouted, stepping in front of my mother in an attempt to shield her from the approaching man. "Go away!" But the madman did not stop. He approached the boundary of the estate, his arms flailing, and then, to everyone's shock, he stood frozen, his body stiff, as though the very ground beneath him had bound his feet.

He stared at my mother, and then, after what felt like an eternity of silence, he spoke—clear, coherent words that no one had heard from him in years.

"Mother, bless me!" he cried out, his voice trembling with devotion. "Bless me, for you will give birth to the son of heaven! He is coming to this earth through you!"

The attendants froze, horror and disbelief etched across their faces. Lalu, the man who had roamed the village for as long as anyone could remember, had not uttered a single understandable sentence in all these years. And yet, here he

was, shouting, dancing with joy, as though possessed by a force beyond human comprehension.

“What... what is he saying?” my mother whispered, her voice betraying her fear, though she tried to remain calm. Her attendants crowded around her, shielding her with their bodies as though Lalu’s words themselves were a threat.

“Bhabhi, don’t worry,” one of the attendants said, her voice trembling as she tried to comfort my mother. “He’s just a madman. His family abandoned him long ago... he doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

But even though they were perplexed. Whispers spread among them like wildfire.

“He hasn’t spoken in years,” one of the younger attendants murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. “Why now? And why is he calling Choti Bhabhi ‘Mother’ and talking about a child from heaven?”

My mother, still seated, stared at the man, her wide eyes filled with an odd mixture of curiosity and fear. In that moment, she remembered the words of the priest, who had once foretold that her child would not be like others and her journey into motherhood would be anything but ordinary.

“Is this... is this part of that prophecy?” she thought, her hands trembling in her lap. She glanced toward her attendants, unsure whether to laugh at the absurdity or cry out in fear.

“We need to tell Mai-sa,” another attendant said, her voice urgent. “This doesn’t seem normal.”

Before my mother could speak, the attendants began ushering her toward the house, trying to lead her away from the madman, whose voice grew louder, filled with ecstatic reverence.

“He is coming! The son of heaven! Mother, bless me!” Lalu continued to shout, his arms raised to the sky like he was calling down the gods themselves. My mother looked back once, watching the madman from over her shoulder as the attendants hurried her inside.

As they reached the safety of the mansion, the last of Lalu’s voice faded into the distance, though his words echoed in my mother’s ears long after they had disappeared from the air. The attendants wasted no time, rushing to Mai-sa’s chambers to relay the events, their voices low but urgent, carrying the weight of fear and confusion.

“Mai-sa, something unusual happened today,” one of the attendants began, her voice barely above a whisper as she stood before the towering figure of Rajeshwari Devi Singh, heads lowered in anticipation of her reaction. There was a palpable tension in the air, giving the impression that the very walls of the mansion were holding their breath, waiting for the inevitable response. The attendant’s hands trembled slightly as she clasped them together, knowing full well that any news brought before Mai-sa was never taken lightly.

Mai-sa, seated on her high-backed chair, slowly lifted her gaze from the ledger she had been reviewing. Her sharp, commanding eyes narrowed, focusing on the young woman before her. “Go on,” she said, her voice calm yet laced with an unspoken authority.

The attendant swallowed hard before continuing. "It's about Lalu... the madman from the village. He ran toward Devika Bhabhi while she was in the garden. It was—" she hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words. "It was strange, Mai-sa. He started shouting and... and dancing."

Mai-sa's brows furrowed in mild disbelief. "Lalu? Shouting? Dancing?" She sat forward slightly, her presence filling the room. "He hasn't spoken a word in years. Are you certain of what you're saying?" There was a hard edge to her voice now, probing for the truth—was this deception, or simply a misunderstanding?

The attendant nodded hastily. "Yes, Mai-sa, I am sure. We all saw it. He ran straight toward the boundary of the estate and stopped. His eyes were fixed on Devika Bhabhi, like he had recognized her. He called her 'Mother' and said she would give birth to the 'son of heaven.' "Then... then he began dancing with joy, shouting those same words again and again. He looked almost..."—the attendant paused, searching for the right words—"like himself again. Happy."

Mai-sa's lips thinned into a hard line, her piercing eyes narrowing further. There was a long, heavy silence in the room, and even the faint sound of the wind outside appeared to die down. This was no ordinary tale of village gossip. Lalu, the man who had been mute and lost to madness for years, suddenly proclaiming a divine child? Such things were not to be ignored.

"He spoke?" Mai-sa repeated, her voice dropping to a lower, more thoughtful tone, laced with an almost

imperceptible note of concern. “Lalu... who hasn’t uttered a word in years?”

The attendants stood frozen, exchanging nervous glances. None of them dared to speak.

Mai-sa’s sharp mind raced. She had heard prophecies before, and there had always been something different about Devika. But this? This was something far more serious. Lalu, a man whom the villagers had long since dismissed as a madman, suddenly shouting of divine intervention? It was an omen, one that couldn’t be overlooked.

Mai-sa rose from her chair, her presence as commanding as ever. “Send word to the head priest in the small village,” she said, turning to one of the senior attendants, her voice firm and unwavering. “Tell him I wish to visit tomorrow. Devika will accompany me.”

The attendant bowed quickly and hurried out of the room to carry out the command. The others remained silent, waiting for further instruction, their faces pale with unease.

Mai-sa turned toward the window, her eyes narrowing as she looked out toward the distant horizon. The sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows across the estate. In the dim light, her expression was unreadable, her thoughts hidden behind the mask of her regal calm. But within, there was a storm brewing. She could feel the weight of something unseen, something powerful and unsettling, shifting the very air around them.

“What are you thinking, Mai-sa?” one of the attendants finally asked, her voice trembling.

Without turning around, Mai-sa responded, her voice low and steady. “I’m thinking that Lalu’s words may not be the ramblings of a madman. The gods have strange ways of revealing their will.”

The attendants exchanged worried glances but said nothing. Mai-sa’s word was final, and if she believed there was more to this, then no one dared to question her judgement.

In another part of the sprawling house, Aunt Sumitra sat in the quiet of her chambers, her mind adrift as the warmth of the late afternoon sun filtered through the latticed windows. The gentle hum of distant voices and the rhythmic sounds of the estate’s daily life were her only company. Her fingers traced absent patterns on the armrest of her chair, her thoughts lingering on nothing in particular, a rare moment of peace in the usually bustling household.

Suddenly, the door swung open with a loud creak, and the serenity shattered. Aunt Damayanti stormed into the room, her face flushed with a mix of anger and agitation. Her dark eyes darted wildly, her breath ragged as though she had just run a great distance.

“Sumitra Didi!” she gasped, her voice frantic, tremors of panic barely concealed beneath her tone. “Do you know what just happened? A madman—he tried to harm Devika!”

Sumitra’s eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat. She stood up abruptly, her heart racing with concern. “What? A madman? Is she alright?” Her words came out hurried, filled with genuine worry for my mother Devika. The thought of Devika, gentle and serene, being in any kind of danger sent a chill down her spine.

Before Sumitra could move any further, Damayanti's hand shot out, gripping her arm with surprising force. "Oh, Didi, wait!" she spat, her voice sharp and bitter. There was something cold behind her eyes, something darker than mere worry. "She's fine... for now." There was an undeniable venom laced in her words, the kind that made Sumitra's heart sink.

Sumitra froze, her expression turning from shock to confusion. "What do you mean, 'for now'?" she asked, her brow furrowing as she studied Damayanti's face.

Damayanti's lip curled in disdain, her voice lowering into a harsh whisper. "Honestly, I wish he had thrown a stone at her face."

The words coiled in the space between us, sharp as a curse, heavy and dangerous. Aunt Sumitra's face paled, her eyes wide with horror. She pulled away and took a step back, shaken by the sudden shock tightening in her chest.

"Damayanti!" Aunt Sumitra's voice was sharp, filled with alarm. "Stop this! Do you hear what you're saying? You'll end up in terrible trouble if someone hears you talk like this! Have you lost your mind?" Her voice trembled, not just from anger but from the deep sense of dread that filled her heart.

Damayanti's eyes narrowed, her dark brows furrowed as she crossed her arms tightly across her chest. Her body trembled, not with fear, but with a hatred that burned so intensely it consumed her entirely. "You don't understand, Didi," she hissed, her voice low and seething with contempt. "She is manipulative and vicious! Every time I see her,

something burns inside me like fire. “She acts so perfect, so pure—like she’s above all of us. I can’t stand her!”

Sumitra shook her head, a wave of sadness passing over her. “Damayanti, listen to yourself. Devika has never harmed you. She’s innocent, kind, and has only ever been gracious to everyone. Why do you hate her so much?” She stepped closer, trying to reach her, trying to pull her back from the edge of her own self-destruction.

But Damayanti’s fists clenched, her knuckles white as she stood rigid, her body taut with resentment. “You think she’s innocent?!” she spat, her voice rising as anger flared. “You’re blind, Didi. She’s deceiving all of you with that sweet smile and perfect face. She thinks she’s better than us—better than me. Every time she walks into the room, everyone looks at her like she’s some kind of goddess.”

Sumitra’s heart ached as she listened, her hands reaching out to soothe the storm raging in Damayanti’s heart. “This jealousy is eating you alive,” Sumitra said softly, her eyes filled with concern. “If you don’t let go of it, Damayanti, it will destroy you from the inside out. This kind of hatred... it will ruin everything you hold dear.”

But Damayanti was too far gone. Her eyes blazed with a fierce determination, her lips twisted into a sneer. “No, Didi,” she whispered, her voice a dangerous mix of anger and certainty. “You’ll see. I will show everyone who she really is. She has all of you under her spell, but I won’t be fooled. Not me. I see her for what she truly is—a manipulative snake, hiding behind that beautiful face of hers.”

Sumitra frowned, shaking her head. “You’re letting your bitterness cloud your judgment. Devika has done nothing to you. This obsession of yours will only lead you down a dark path, Damayanti. Please, stop before it’s too late.”

But Damayanti’s face hardened even further, her voice now a harsh whisper, thick with resentment. “No, Didi. She’s using black magic on this family—I know it. But not on me. I am protected.” Her eyes glistened with something that bordered on madness, a deep-seated conviction that sent chills down Sumitra’s spine.

Sumitra sighed deeply, knowing that her words would not reach the wounded heart standing before her. Damayanti was lost, consumed by an anger that had festered for too long. “I pray you find peace, Damayanti,” Sumitra said softly, her voice tinged with sorrow. “Because if you continue down this path, you will only hurt yourself.”

For a moment, silence filled the room, heavy and suffocating. Damayanti stood there, her chest rising and falling with labored breaths, her eyes burning with unspoken rage. And then, without another word, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the room, her footsteps echoing in the empty halls as she disappeared into the shadows of the mansion.

Sumitra stood there for a long time, the weight of the conversation pressing heavily on her chest. She could still feel the chill in the air, left behind by Damayanti’s bitterness, and she feared for what might come next.

As she sat back down, her thoughts drifted once again, but this time there was no peace. The seeds of discord had been

sown, and Sumitra knew, deep in her heart, that those seeds would one day bear bitter fruit.

That evening, as the lamps were lit and the soft glow filled the mansion, my mother sat in her chambers, her hands resting in her lap, her mind swirling with thoughts of the day's events. She hadn't spoken much since the incident with Lalu, but the weight of his words hung heavily on her heart.

As the night deepened, and the household settled into a tense, uneasy quiet, the words of the madman echoed in the minds of all who had heard them. The son of heaven, he had said. And though none of them could fully grasp the meaning of those words, they knew, deep down, that this was only the beginning.

The omens had begun.

The next morning dawned with an eerie stillness, every rustle of leaves and distant bird calls felt amplified. My mother, Devika, and Mai-sa prepared themselves for the journey to our ancestral home in the village, where they were to meet with the head priest. Despite the day's clear intent, there was an unsettling feeling in the air.

As they stepped into the chariot, draped in thick woolen shawls to guard against the biting chill of winter, the horses snorted anxiously, their breath forming small clouds in the frosty air. The morning fog was heavy, blanketing the dense jungle ahead with an impenetrable veil of white. The sunlight, weak and filtered, struggled to pierce through the mist, casting strange, distorted shadows on the path ahead.

Mai-sa, ever composed, glanced at my mother, who sat quietly beside her, her hands gently placed on her lap, her face

calm but inwardly restless. There was something unspoken between them. A quiet acknowledgment of the strange happenings that had surrounded my mother ever since the future was told. The prophecy. The omens. The inexplicable.

The horses trotted along, their hooves sinking softly into the damp earth, but as they approached the darkest stretch of the forest, something changed. The horses began to slow, their ears twitching, their eyes widening with what could only be described as fear. The fog thickened, wrapping itself around the trees like a shroud, and the once-familiar road now looked unfamiliar, as though it had come alive.

Suddenly, the horses stopped—their bodies stiff, nostrils flaring, sensing a danger no one else could see. The chariot lurched as the animals refused to move any further. The charioteer, a seasoned man accustomed to the unpredictable wilds of the jungle, dismounted and approached the horses, his brow furrowed in concern.

Something was wrong. As he looked ahead, his eyes fell upon a massive fallen tree, blocking half the path. It looked freshly toppled, its roots still wet with the soil they had torn free from. Mai-sa, ever the pragmatist, peered out of the chariot window. Her eyes, sharp and wise, scanned the path ahead. The fallen tree was no coincidence.

“What’s the matter?” Mai-sa asked, her voice soft but steady, though the unease in her chest grew stronger with every passing second.

Before the charioteer could respond, a figure emerged from the mist.

A monk, draped in saffron robes glowing faintly in the pale light. His presence was spectral, his movements slow and deliberate. The fog parted for him, creating a path as he made his way toward the chariot. His bald head gleamed, and in his hand, he carried a simple wooden staff, tapping softly on the ground with each step.

Mai-sa, a woman of immense strength and authority, instinctively straightened, her eyes narrowing with a mix of curiosity and caution. This was no ordinary traveler.

The monk stopped a few feet from the chariot, his face calm and composed, the expression of someone who had been waiting for this moment. His deep, wise eyes rested on my mother, then slowly shifted to Mai-sa.

“What brings you here, Swami?” Mai-sa asked, her voice carrying the weight of respect, but also the firmness of a matriarch who had seen many strange things in her time.

The monk did not answer immediately. Instead, he closed his eyes briefly, as though offering a silent prayer, before opening them and offering a smile filled with deep reverence.

“Nothing but blessings, Maa,” he said softly, his voice carrying an unearthly calm. “I am blessed beyond measure to have crossed paths with you today. Truly, the heavens have smiled upon me.”

His words were soft, yet they lingered in the mist, heavy with a meaning not yet spoken—like a prophecy waiting to unfold.

Mai-sa, though humbled by his words, was not easily swayed. She studied him closely, her instincts telling her that

this man had come not by chance but by some unseen design. “It is we who are blessed, Swami. Please, bless our family.”

The monk’s smile deepened, his eyes twinkling with a knowledge far beyond the present moment. “Your family is already blessed, Maa,” he said, his voice rich with certainty. “The one who grows within her”—he nodded toward my mother— “is destined to bring peace and harmony to this world. He will be guarded by angels, for his fate is tied to the heavens. His presence will leave an indelible mark upon the earth.”

The words struck like a bell, reverberating through the cold, misty air. Mai-sa’s breath caught in her throat, and she felt a quiet joy bloom in her chest. She had always sensed that my mother was special. But hearing it from this monk—a stranger whose arrival felt divinely timed—brought her a powerful sense of affirmation, a feeling that destiny was guiding them along a path far greater than they yet understood.

My mother, though silent, felt the shift in the air. She glanced at Mai-sa, her hand unconsciously resting on her belly. There was something about the monk’s presence, about his words, that made her heart beat a little faster. Was it fear? Or was it fascination?

Sensing their silent questions, the monk offered one final bow, his hands pressed together in prayer. “Fear not, for the heavens are with you. The path may be uncertain, but you do not walk it alone.”

With those words, he turned and slowly walked away, his figure fading into the fog as mysteriously as he had appeared.

The mist swallowed him whole, leaving behind only the faint echo of his staff tapping against the earth.

For a moment, the world stood still. Even the horses, which had been tense and uneasy, now appeared calm, as though the monk's presence had soothed their fears. The charioteer, who had been watching from the side, looked to Mai-sa for instruction.

"Let's continue," Mai-sa said, her voice softer now, her usual commanding tone tempered by the lingering sense of the divine. "The road ahead may be unclear, but we must follow it."

As the chariot lurched forward, resuming its journey through the fog-shrouded forest, both my mother and Mai-sa remained quiet, their minds turning over the monk's words.

The air was thick with destiny, and it had only just begun to reveal itself.

After one hour travelling through dense forests and winding roads, the chariot finally crested a hill, revealing the ancient ancestral temple of our family. The temple loomed large against the horizon, a solemn sentinel nestled at the foothills, half-carved into the earth itself. Its stone walls, weathered by centuries of wind and rain, bore the scars of time. The once-vibrant limestone paint now a pale white, streaked with dark patches where the rains had left their mark. Yet, the temple stood tall and formidable, as though the Goddess Kali herself watched over it, ensuring its eternal endurance.

As the chariot pulled up to the temple steps, the air around them changed—denser, charged with an unseen energy. My

mother, Devika, and Mai-sa stepped out, the faint echo of their footsteps lost in the expanse of silence that engulfed the temple grounds. The mountains loomed behind the temple, their towering forms casting deep shadows that only enhanced the mysterious, otherworldly atmosphere.

The head priest, an elderly man with a long flowing beard and gentle, wise eyes, stood waiting for them at the entrance. His face, radiant with joy, broke into a tranquil smile as he clasped his hands in a respectful greeting.

“Pranam, Mai-sa,” he said, his voice deep but gentle, filled with reverence. “You grace this temple with your presence.”

Mai-sa nodded, her stern face softening slightly as she returned his greeting. “It is an honor for us to come here, Pandit ji. We have come to seek blessings and guidance.” She cast a glance at my mother, who looked around the temple in astonishment, her wide almond eyes tracing the intricate carvings that lined the stone walls.

The temple had always been a place of great significance to our family, but for my mother, this was only her second visit since her wedding. Flickering diyas lined the entrance, their soft flames dancing in the cool breeze, casting long, flickering shadows that made the carvings on the walls seem to move.

Inside, the sanctum had the feel of a sacred cave, carved into the hills behind the temple. The air grew heavier with the scent of burning incense and sandalwood. A faint glow emanated from the sanctum, where the fierce Goddess Kali stood, draped in garlands of fresh flowers.

Legend has it that the flowers were placed there by the angels, who offered their prayers to the goddess before the first

light of dawn. And true to the legend, each dawn bore witness to a quiet miracle—for no matter how early the temple doors were unbarred, the diyas stood aglow, and the flowers lay fresh as though offered by unseen hands.

The head priest, leading them inside, raised his hands to the statue of Maa Kali and muttered a few words of prayer. The flickering flames seemed to grow brighter in acknowledgment of their presence. After the rituals, he turned his attention fully to Mai-sa and my mother, his eyes resting on Devika with a strange, almost knowing look.

“Mai-sa, today is indeed a blessed day,” he began, his voice thick with meaning. “A child destined for greatness shall come through her—marked by the heavens. I can sense it already.”

Mai-sa remained composed, though her heart beat faster. “She has been surrounded by strange events, Pandit ji. Unusual omens and prophecies have followed her since the day of her wedding. We need your guidance.”

The priest's gaze never wavered from my mother, who sat quietly, still lost in the beauty of the temple but unaware of the growing significance of the moment. He nodded slowly, stepping closer. “There are signs, Maa. Look at her hands, her feet.” He gently gestured for my mother to reveal her palm and her foot.

Mai-sa, her curiosity piqued, leaned forward as the priest pointed to delicate markings on my mother's palm—a chakra, intricate and clear—and on her feet, where the faint outline of a lotus flower could be seen.

“These are not ordinary markings,” the priest whispered, his voice almost reverent. “These are the signs of the divine.

The one she will carry will be no ordinary child. A soul sent to guide us, to protect us in an age of darkness. His presence will bring transformation—peace, yes—but also great challenges.”

A hush fell over the temple. The flames of the diyas flickered as though stirred by an invisible hand. Even the wind outside paused awaiting the next words from the priest.

Mai-sa, her eyes now wide with silent amazement, took in every word. This was more than she had ever hoped to hear. “A special soul...” she murmured to herself, the words sinking deep into her heart. She turned to my mother, who, though confused by the weight of the conversation, instinctively sensed that something profound was unfolding.

The priest continued, his voice now lower, more solemn. “There will be forces that oppose him, that will try to stop him before he can fulfill his destiny. You must protect her”—he looked directly at Mai-sa— “at all costs. The heavens have a plan, but so do the shadows.”

As the words settled in the air, a sudden gust of wind swept through the temple, extinguishing all but one of the diyas. The lone flame, flickering against the goddess’s feet, burned brighter, casting an ethereal glow over the room.

Mai-sa stood taller, her usual calm demeanor now replaced by a sense of purpose. “We will do whatever it takes,” she vowed, her voice unwavering.

The priest nodded, his face filled with the weight of what he had just spoken. “Be vigilant, Mai-sa. The path ahead is not easy, but it is divinely guided. The forces of light and darkness will clash, but this child will carry the light within him.”

With that, the ceremony came to a close. As they stepped outside, the fog that had shrouded their journey earlier had lifted, replaced by a crisp, clear air. The chariot awaited them, but the journey back felt different. There was a reverence that clung to them like the scent of the temple's incense, an invisible aura of protection and expectation.

As they rode back to the mansion, Mai-sa's mind raced. The priest's words had confirmed what she had long suspected—my mother was destined for something far greater than anyone could have imagined. She glanced at Devika, who sat silently, her hands resting on her lap. The markings, the omens, the prophecies—they all pointed to one thing. Something sacred was about to happen.

When they arrived home, Mai-sa wasted no time. "Watch over her," she instructed the household staff, her voice stern but filled with a protective love. "Devika will carry someone precious. We must guard her with everything we have."

The staff nodded, understanding the gravity of her words. And though my mother had not yet conceived, a noticeable sense of anticipation filled the house. The temple's blessing felt like a protective veil draped over them all.

The morning after the visit to the temple, Aunt Damayanti's curiosity was a living thing, growing uncontrollable. Whispers snaked their way through the household like vines, their tendrils curling around every corner, every ear. The blessing bestowed upon my mother, Devika, at the temple had ignited more than just reverence in the household—it had lit a fire of jealousy in Damayanti's

heart. Her mind, already consumed by insecurities, now teetered on the edge of bitterness.

Unable to suppress her curiosity, Damayanti approached the servants, who were bustling quietly in the courtyard, their eyes darting to and fro as though they were aware of the weight of the tasks they'd been given.

"What did Mai-sa say to you?" Damayanti asked, her voice a forced sweetness that did little to hide the sharp edge of impatience cutting through.

The servants, wary of Damayanti's temper, exchanged quick glances before one of them answered with cautious deference. "Bhabhi, Mai-sa instructed us to take extra care of Devika Bhabhi," one of the maids replied, her tone measured and careful. "We are to keep a close watch on her. We've been assigned shifts to ensure she is well taken care of."

Damayanti's jaw clenched, her hands twisting the ends of her dupatta in frustration. "Yes, of course," she muttered, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "No one cares about anyone else anymore, do they? Who could possibly be important now that we have a blessed queen in the house?" Her words were barely audible, spoken more to herself than anyone else, but they carried the unmistakable sting of resentment.

As the servants hurried away to avoid her wrath, Damayanti's mind whirled. Her thoughts twisted and turned like a storm building inside her. Devika—the woman who had stolen the attention of everyone, including Mai-sa—had to be knocked off her pedestal. "Who is she to be worshipped like this?" she thought bitterly. She was plotting already, searching

for a way to shift the balance of power, to pull the family's attention back to herself.

Later in the day, Damayanti, now a picture of false sweetness, entered my mother's room. The air in the room was still and peaceful, the scent of freshly lit incense floating gently through the open window, mingling with the soft rays of sunlight that bathed the space in a warm, golden glow. My mother was resting, having just finished her daily reading from the holy book, as instructed by Mai-sa. She had an aura of serenity, her calm face reflecting the purity that Damayanti could never understand.

"Didi, how are you feeling?" Damayanti asked, her voice laced with an almost imperceptible bitterness, masked under a tone of polite concern.

Devika looked up, her expression one of gentle surprise at the sudden visit. "Oh, Damayanti, I'm feeling perfectly fine, thank you." She smiled warmly, too innocent to sense the venom that lay beneath Damayanti's words. "I was just finishing my reading from the scriptures as Mai-sa suggested. I thought I'd take a little rest. Come, sit with me," she said, gesturing for Damayanti to sit beside her.

But Damayanti didn't step forward. She remained rooted to the spot, her eyes sweeping the room with thinly veiled disdain. "Oh no, Didi," she said, her voice coated in false modesty. "How could I possibly sit with you? You're the center of everything now—the whole household orbits around you. I'm just a nobody here. No one even notices me anymore."

Devika's brow furrowed slightly, confused by the sudden shift in tone. "Why are you talking like this, Damayanti? We

are family. We should grow together, support one another, like a family should.” Her words were sincere, her eyes soft and warm as she spoke. “You know I have no such thoughts in my heart. We must always stand by each other.”

But Damayanti’s bitterness ran too deep to be assuaged by Devika’s kindness. Her fingers clenched tighter around the fabric of her sari, her frustration mounting. “Yes, Didi, we must support one another... but sometimes it feels like the rest of us are forgotten,” she muttered, her eyes narrowing as she looked away.

Though the words refused to fade, Devika offered no defense. She had long understood that some wounds are too old to be soothed by gentle gestures. Silence passed between them, heavy but familiar—a silence that neither healed nor deepened the rift, only acknowledged it. Yet beyond this quiet tension, something had begun to shift.

Days passed, and with each passing moment, the household appeared to move in quiet anticipation. Conversations hushed whenever my mother entered a room, and the servants moved with an air of reverence around her, as though they could sense that something extraordinary was about to unfold.

Yet, beneath the surface of this serenity, Damayanti’s resentment festered, growing like a dark shadow that threatened to engulf the peace that had settled over the family. She watched, her sharp eyes ever vigilant, for any sign that could shift the tides in her favor.

One evening, as the family gathered in the main hall for dinner, a cold wind swept through the open courtyard,

extinguishing the lamps that had been lit around the verandah. It was sudden, an almost unnatural gust, and for a moment, the entire household fell into an eerie silence.

Mai-sa, ever alert, looked up from her seat, her eyes narrowing as she glanced towards the darkened verandah. "Strange weather for this time of year," she murmured, her voice thoughtful. "It feels the winds carry something with them... an omen perhaps."

The room grew still, everyone exchanging uneasy glances. Even Devika, normally unperturbed, felt a strange chill run down her spine, like the winds themselves were whispering secrets meant only for her.

The moment passed quickly, but the mystical air lingered, wrapping itself around the household like a veil of uncertainty. And though no one spoke of it, there was a growing sense that something beyond their understanding was unfolding. A larger force was at work, and fate was beginning to reveal its mysterious hand.

As the days wore on, the household braced itself for what was to come. Mai-sa remained vigilant, ensuring that my mother was protected at all times. But in the shadows, Damayanti watched, her mind still scheming, still plotting, waiting for the right moment to strike. She was certain that the winds of change could be manipulated, bent to her will.

Chapter 3

The Womb's Guardians

One night, four months after the visit to the ancient temple, the air around our family home was still with a palpable anticipation. The village lay quiet under a canopy of stars, with only the occasional rustle of leaves breaking the silence. In the darkness of the house, my parents lay fast asleep, the day's worries tucked away, replaced by the quiet rhythm of their breaths.

But as the midnight hour crept in, my mother, Devika, was stirred by something far beyond the ordinary. Her sleep shifted into something deeper, and in the silence of the night, she was visited by a dream—an omen that would shape her destiny and mine.

In the dream, celestial beings descended, their forms bathed in radiant light, with an aura of peace and divine power surrounding them. Their faces were soft, calm, but their presence carried the weight of something profound.

“Devika,” they spoke in unison, their voices a harmonious blend of warmth and authority, “You will soon carry a great

responsibility. A boy will be born from you, one who will rise and make even heaven proud.”

As the words rose into the quiet, their ethereal forms began to shift and change. Their serene, human-like shapes transformed into three large, majestic snakes, their scales shimmering in the moonlight like liquid gold. The snakes coiled around my mother, their eyes glowing with a mystical light, both soothing and unsettling.

“We will protect you,” they hissed softly, their voices now echoing like whispers from the divine. “Fear not, for your child is chosen. We will guard him, as we guard you.”

The scene was both beautiful and terrifying—a promise of protection wrapped in the mystery of serpents. And then, as quickly as they had appeared, The celestial beings-turned-serpents faded into the shadows of the dream, leaving my mother with a sense of reverence and dread.

Unconsciously, my mother began to whisper in her sleep, her lips moving in silent conversation with unseen figures. It wasn’t long before my father, sleeping beside her, stirred from his rest. Though soft, the whispers carried a strange intensity—enough to wake him instantly.

“Devika, Devika!” my father said urgently, reaching for her shoulder. He shook her gently, his voice edged with concern. “What’s happening? Are you alright?”

My mother woke with a start, her chest rising and falling rapidly, eyes wide and glazed with the remnants of the dream. Sweat clung to her brow, and for a moment, she looked lost in the space between sleep and waking—still held by whatever vision had gripped her.

“What happened?” she asked, her voice hoarse as she blinked herself fully awake.

“You were whispering in your sleep,” my father said softly, his stern voice now filled with tenderness. “It scared me. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

My mother sat up slowly, running her hands through her hair, still trying to make sense of what had just happened. The weight of the dream lingered on her “I...I had a dream,” she began, her voice shaky. “I was visited by divine beings. They told me that I will soon be pregnant, and that I’ll give birth to a boy—someone who will make even the heavens proud.”

A brief silence fell over them. My father, always the rational one, processed her words carefully. But he believed in omens, in the signs the universe offered. And this was prophecy, wrapped in the cloak of the mystical.

“That’s wonderful news, Devika,” he said, pulling her close, offering the comfort of his warmth. “But you sound afraid. Why? This is a blessing.”

My mother took a deep breath, her voice breaking under the weight of her fears. “I’m scared,” she admitted, her eyes filling with unshed tears. “I’ve read stories of children born under divine omens. Their lives are never normal. They’re always burdened with struggles, facing dangers no one else understands. What if I’m not capable of protecting him? What if I fail?”

My father placed his hand on her cheek, tilting her face so she could look at him. “Devika,” he said firmly but lovingly, “everything will happen as it is meant to. We all have our destinies, and our child—he will be strong, just like you. We’ve

already been given signs of his arrival. Trust in that. We will protect him together.”

Though his words brought her some comfort, the fear still gnawed at her, lingering like the shadows in the corners of the room. That morning, my mother shared the dream with Mai-sa. The two of them sat in the garden, the early morning sunlight filtering through the trees, casting soft shafts of light across the grass.

“Mai-sa,” my mother began, her voice trembling slightly, “something strange happened last night. I had a dream... a dream of celestial beings. They told me I would soon be pregnant with a boy—someone special. But, in the end, they turned into snakes, and they promised to protect me. It was so vivid, so real, and yet so terrifying.”

Mai-sa, ever composed, listened carefully, her eyes narrowing slightly as she processed the details of the dream. “We all know something extraordinary is going to happen,” she said finally, her voice steady. “You are part of a divine plan, Devika. We are fortunate to witness this.”

“But what if I’m not strong enough?” my mother whispered, her voice laced with doubt. “What if I fail him? Will I be a good mother? Can I carry the weight of this responsibility?”

“Devika,” Mai-sa said softly, placing a hand on her arm, “it’s natural to feel fear. Every woman faces it before becoming a mother. I had those fears too, during my first pregnancy. But you were chosen for this. You will carry within you a child destined for greatness. You will rise to the occasion—because

you must. Believe in yourself, my dear. You are stronger than you think."

The words lingered in the air, and for the first time, my mother felt a small sense of relief. As the days passed, the sense of anticipation grew stronger, the universe itself seeming to hold its breath, waiting for the moment when everything would change.

Days passed, and the atmosphere in the house hummed with an invisible tension, like the stillness before a storm. Then, one early morning, something strange happened. My mother, Devika, awoke with a start, her heart pounding in her chest. She blinked, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep, but her breath caught when she saw three snakes silently gazing at her from the foot of her bed.

Still groggy, the sight was so shocking that for a brief moment, she was unsure if it was a dream or reality. But the glint in their black, unblinking eyes, the soft movement of their coiled bodies, was too real. Panic seized her. Instinctively, she let out a scream, a sharp cry that pierced the early morning silence and echoed through the corridors.

Her attendant, who slept just outside her chamber, rushed in, disoriented and alarmed. "What happened, Bhabhi?" she asked breathlessly, seeing the pale terror on my mother's face.

"I saw... three snakes. They were watching me," my mother whispered, her voice trembling as she clutched the sheets tightly.

The attendant's eyes widened in fear, but she tried to remain composed, though the dread was already creeping into her bones. "I'll check," she said, though her voice was barely

steady. She walked cautiously toward the bed, every step like walking on thin ice. As she bent down to check, her breath hitched in her throat. "Oh... my god," she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

There, coiled like shadows made flesh, were three sleek black snakes. They didn't move aggressively—only watched. Their stillness was almost supernatural, as though they were waiting... as if they knew they had a purpose.

"Bhabhi, they're here—three snakes!" The attendant's voice was a trembling whisper, panic evident as she backed away slowly, her legs unsteady. Without waiting for a response, she bolted out of the room, fear overtaking any sense of duty. As she ran through the halls, her cries echoed off the stone walls, spreading like wildfire.

"Snakes! Snakes!" she screamed, her voice filled with alarm. The household erupted into confusion and chaos. Servants and family members scrambled out of their rooms, some running in fear, others bewildered by the sudden uproar. The sound of hurried footsteps and panicked voices filled the air as everyone tried to understand the source of the commotion.

But amidst the chaos, my mother remained frozen. As the rest of the house descended into hysteria, she felt a strange calm washing over her, a profound sense of clarity that appeared to settle like a second skin. These snakes—they were not a threat. They were the same snakes from her dream, the ones who had promised protection. Her breath slowed, and she could feel the fear that had gripped her begin to dissolve.

Slowly, she rose from the bed, her movements measured and deliberate. She bent down cautiously, meeting the gaze of

the snakes—her eyes wide, but no longer trembling. The room pulsed with a luminous energy, yet she didn't flinch. The snakes' eyes held hers, and in that moment, it was as though they communicated silently, imparting a message only she could understand.

It was then that she knew—the time had come.

Meanwhile, the rest of the house remained in an uproar, the sound of the attendant's cries continuing to send ripples of panic. No one understood the deeper significance of the serpents. But my mother did. She moved with purpose now, no longer the uncertain woman she had been moments before.

She left her room, her footsteps soft yet deliberate, and headed toward Mai-sa's quarters. She wasn't afraid anymore. The warrior-like calm that had settled over her remained, as she stepped into the role that destiny had long been preparing her for.

Standing at the doorway of Mai-sa's room, my mother took a breath and called out.

"Mai-sa, may I come in?" Her voice was different, steady, like a river that had found its course after much meandering.

Mai-sa, sitting in her chair, looked up from the sacred book she had been reading. The tone of my mother's voice caught her attention. "Devika? Come in, daughter," she responded, her brow furrowing slightly as she sensed something was amiss.

My mother entered the room, her movements graceful yet charged with quiet purpose. Her face, once pale and frightened, now glowed with a calm, resolute strength.

"Mai-sa," my mother began, her eyes locking with her mother-in-law's. "The time has come. They have arrived. It has begun." Her voice was firm, carrying with it a conviction that left no room for doubt.

Mai-sa's eyebrows arched, taken aback by the shift in her daughter-in-law's demeanor. She studied my mother's face, the glow on her cheeks, the fierce calm in her eyes. There was no fear, only readiness.

"You sound... different, Devika," Mai-sa said, her voice laced with curiosity and wonder. "There is strength in your voice."

"I am no longer afraid, Mai-sa," my mother said, standing tall. "I am ready for this. The signs have revealed themselves. It's time." Her words carried an undeniable force, as though she had finally accepted the weight of her destiny.

For a long moment, Mai-sa was silent, her piercing eyes studying her daughter-in-law. Then, slowly, a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Yes, my daughter," she said softly, "you are now ready." There was pride in her voice, a recognition that Devika had crossed a threshold, one from which there was no return.

Without hesitation, Mai-sa called one of the servants from the hallway. "Summon the village midwife," she instructed, her tone decisive. "It's time to confirm what we've suspected."

As the servant rushed to carry out the order, my mother remained in the room, standing tall, the strength from her divine encounter still coursing through her veins. There was no turning back now. The prophecy was in motion, and all that was left was to embrace the mystical path that lay ahead.

Meanwhile, outside my mother's room, the commotion had drawn the attention of the household staff. Harpal, the head servant, had arrived, his face set with grim determination, clutching a large stick in his calloused hands. Two other men followed close behind him, their expressions reflecting both fear and resolve.

Harpal, though a man of few words, held unquestioned authority among the household staff—a man whose imposing presence and unwavering loyalty to the family made him both feared and respected.

Harpal stood tall, his broad-shouldered frame seeming even larger in the dim light of the hallway. His piercing gaze, framed by thick eyebrows, missed nothing, and his proud moustache—worn like a badge of honor—spoke of his Rajput heritage.

He wore his crisp white dhoti with the same pride as a warrior dons his armor, and his black kurta stretched over his muscular build, emphasizing his readiness for action. Atop his head, a spotless white turban, always perfectly wrapped, was a reminder of his disciplined nature.

"Bai-sa, we are ready," Harpal said with a slight bow, his voice deep and respectful, though edged with caution. "We'll handle the snakes with one strike."

His hand tightened around the stick, prepared to do what he believed was his duty. The two men behind him glanced nervously at one another, waiting for his command, their hands gripping smaller rods, ready to eliminate the threat.

But as they stood there, poised for action, my mother reached there. She was no longer the woman they had known—a quiet, gentle presence in the household. Now, there was something different about her, a quiet strength that had not been there before.

"No need," she said, her voice steady and firm. Her gaze met Harpal's, and for the first time, he faltered. "Leave them alone. They will harm no one."

Her words, spoken with such conviction, left everyone speechless. Harpal, a man who had always trusted his instincts, was now caught off guard. This was not the Devika Bai-sa he had known—the kind, soft-spoken woman who deferred to others. Her tone carried an authority he couldn't question, but the weight of his duty still tugged at him.

He took a hesitant step forward, lowering his head slightly. "Bai-sa... what if they hurt someone? It's safer if we remove them now," Harpal said, his voice trembling ever so slightly. His Rajput pride made him uncomfortable with backing down, but something in Devika Bai-sa's eyes gave him pause. The presence of the snakes unnerved him, but her certainty unnerved him more.

My mother took a step closer to him, her gaze unwavering. "I said once, no need to worry," she repeated, her voice calm but commanding. "Go back to your work. They pose no threat to anyone, and they will leave on their own."

Her words settled over the room, and for a moment, no one moved. The servants exchanged confused glances, uncertain of how to respond. Harpal searched her face for some hint of doubt but found none. What had changed in her? For the first time in his life, Harpal found himself at a loss.

The snakes were there, real and dangerous—or so he had thought. But my mother's confidence, the serenity in her voice, made him doubt his own instincts. Slowly, he stepped back, lowering the stick in his hand, the weight of the moment pressing down on him.

The other two men hesitated, waiting for his command. But Harpal, his eyes never leaving my mother's, finally gave a nod. "As you wish, Bai-sa." His voice was soft, almost reverent now.

Without another word, my mother walked into her room, her back straight, her steps unhurried. The rest of the household stood frozen, watching her disappear behind the door. There was a shift in the air, a sense that something sacred had just transpired, though no one could quite explain it.

Inside her room, my mother stood at the window, gazing out into the soft morning light. The weight of her newfound knowledge pressed upon her, but she was not afraid. The presence of the snakes, their silent promise of protection, had filled her with a deep, unshakeable resolve. She knew now, with certainty, that this was only the beginning.

Outside, Harpal and the other servants lingered for a moment, still confused, still shaken. The tension in the air

was thick, like the moments before a storm. The snakes had not left, but somehow, their presence no longer felt threatening.

As they turned to leave, a strange wind swept through the courtyard, rustling the leaves in the trees. The wind carried with it a soft, almost melodic whisper—a sound so faint it could have been imagined. But Harpal heard it. The other servants heard it too. And though they said nothing, a quiet reverence settled over them.

After what felt like hours, the old midwife finally arrived at our home, her wrinkled hands clutching a small bundle of herbs and sacred threads. She moved slowly, her body bent with age, but her eyes were sharp, filled with a wisdom that could only come from decades of experience. As she entered the room where my mother sat, the air grew thick with anticipation. Everyone held their breath, waiting for the news that could change everything.

The midwife approached my mother, performing the age-old rituals that had been passed down through generations. She murmured sacred chants under her breath, her fingers tracing intricate patterns over my mother's belly, her movements deliberate and measured. My mother sat quietly, her hands resting in her lap, her heart racing with both fear and hope. The air in the room shimmered, alive with a presence that pressed against the walls, marking the gravity of what was unfolding.

After what felt like an eternity, the midwife paused. A slow smile spread across her face—quiet, knowing, certain. “Yes, she

is pregnant,” she declared, her voice soft but steady, each word carrying the weight and warmth of a blessing.

Mai-sa’s face lit up with joy, her normally stern features softening into a rare, proud smile. “Thank the gods!” she exclaimed.

Without hesitation, Mai-sa ordered gifts to be brought forth. A large tray, heavy with bundles of notes and shining silver coins, was carried in by the servants. With a proud smile, Mai-sa took the tray herself and began showering my mother with the gifts, scattering the money and jewels over her head in a gesture of overwhelming celebration. The soft clinking of the coins against the floor was drowned out by the hush that settled over the room.

My mother sat there, humbled and overwhelmed by the grandeur of the moment. She looked up at Mai-sa, her eyes glistening with emotion. “Mai-sa, this is too much—”

“Nonsense, child,” Mai-sa interrupted, her voice firm yet full of affection. “This is a blessing for all of us. You carry something sacred within you. We must honor that.”

The room buzzed with quiet excitement, the air thick with the energy of something divine. Even the servants, who stood at a respectful distance, couldn’t help but smile, their faces lit with the joy of witnessing this rare, intimate moment of celebration.

But not everyone shared in the joy. In the corner of the room, Aunt Damayanti stood with her arms crossed, her lips pursed in barely concealed disdain. Her dark eyes flickered with jealousy as she watched the gifts being showered over my mother. Unable to contain herself, she leaned in close to Aunt

Gomti, her voice a sharp whisper. “Didi, what’s gotten into Mai-sa? She’s acting like this is the first baby ever in the family.”

Aunt Gomti, ever the diplomat, turned sharply toward Damayanti. “Damayanti, enough. You must learn to control that tongue of yours. We are all part of this family, and you would do well to show some respect.” Her voice was stern, carrying the weight of an unspoken warning. “You may be young, but you are no child. Know your place.”

Caught off guard and clearly embarrassed, Damayanti fell silent, though the fire of resentment continued to burn in her eyes. She stormed off, her footsteps sharp with anger, vanishing from the gathering as the joy around her only deepened the sting of her bitterness.

Meanwhile, Mai-sa, continued to bask in the joy of the moment. She turned to one of her attendants and, in her calm but authoritative voice, gave an order. “Summon everyone in the household. No one is to be left out of this announcement. And send it to Mithila as well.”

Servants hurried to obey, gathering the remaining members of the household. Soon, Aunt Savitri, Aunt Gomti, and even a brooding Aunt Damayanti had gathered in the cream-colored hall, adorned with dark maroon chesterfield sofas. The cool breeze from the open windows carried with it a faint scent of jasmine.

Seated regally in her large chair, Mai-sa surveyed the room with a commanding presence that left no room for interruption. “My children,” she began, her voice strong and filled with pride, “listen carefully. Devika is carrying a special

child. From this moment on, she is to be watched over with the utmost care. No one, and I mean no one, will be allowed into her room except for her personal attendant and Mithila when she arrives. We must protect her, for this is not an ordinary pregnancy.”

A murmur of wonder and curiosity spread through the gathering. The gravity of Mai-sa’s words was not lost on them. The family had long been steeped in tradition and mysticism, and they knew that her pronouncement carried weight far beyond the mundane.

From the corner of the room, Aunt Damayanti’s dark eyes flickered with contempt, her jealousy now an obvious force. She stood silently, watching as the family gathered closer to my mother, their faces filled with joy and reverence. But behind Damayanti’s calm exterior, the storm of resentment raged, her thoughts spiraling into darker, more dangerous territory.

As the gathering slowly dispersed, my mother was guided back to her room by her attendants, her face a mixture of relief and anticipation. Inside, beneath her bed, the three guardian snakes remained coiled, their presence a quiet reminder of the divine forces at play. My mother sat on the edge of the bed, her hand resting gently on her stomach, and looked down at the serpents.

A soft whisper escaped her lips. “Thank you,” she murmured, her voice barely audible, but filled with gratitude. She knew now that she was not alone—that the forces of the universe were watching over her, guiding her every step.

As she sat there, a warm breeze drifted in through the window. The air shimmered for a moment, the atmosphere alive with an energy that could be felt but not seen. The snakes remained still, their eyes watching her with a quiet, reverent gaze.

After a while, Mai-sa entered the room with an air of quiet authority, her sari trailing softly across the floor as she entered the room. Her face, usually so stern and unreadable, now held a mixture of pride and concern—emotions she rarely allowed to surface.

Since the revelation of my mother's pregnancy, the bond between them had grown deeper, more sacred. It was as though they both sensed that this journey would not merely be a family matter, but one steeped in the mystical and divine. They knew the path ahead was fraught with uncertainties, yet they stood bound—by family, by love, and by fate.

"Devika, Devika, are you there?" Mai-sa's voice was unusually soft as she called out, her eyes scanning the room.

"Yes, Mai-sa," my mother responded, her voice carrying the weight of exhaustion. She quickly adjusted her scarf, attempting to rise from the bed to greet her mother-in-law with respect, though fatigue pulled at her limbs.

"Sit, child," Mai-sa said, gesturing toward the nearby sofa as she settled down herself with the grace of a queen. She watched Devika closely as she moved, her eyes scanning for any sign of discomfort. "How are you feeling, Devika? Are you happy?" There was a hint of urgency in her tone, as though she needed reassurance that everything was unfolding as it should.

With a gentle smile, my mother moved closer and sat beside her. Despite the weight she carried, her face still radiated a soft glow, a quiet happiness that had taken root in her heart. “Mai-sa, I am beyond happy,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper but filled with sincerity. “Your love, your blessings... I feel so fortunate to be your daughter-in-law. I couldn’t ask for more.”

Mai-sa’s eyes softened, rare for her. “We are the ones blessed, Devika,” she replied, her voice tender as she looked at my mother, her gaze lingering on her belly. “This child you carry—it is special. Not just for this family, but for something far greater. I feel it in my bones.” She paused, her eyes growing distant, searching the silence for a glimpse of what lay ahead.

After a brief silence, curiosity flickered in her eyes. “Tell me, Devika,” she said, her voice lowering, “where are the snakes? Can I see them?”

A slight tension passed through the air at the mention of the snakes. My mother hesitated, but only for a moment. “Yes, Mai-sa,” she replied softly. With a graceful movement, she stood and walked toward the bed, her hands trembling slightly as she gently lifted the edge of the bed sheet. The room held its breath.

There, beneath the bed, lay the three snakes. Their sleek, dark bodies were coiled in perfect stillness, their eyes fixed on my mother. They met Mai-sa’s gaze with an unsettling calm, fully aware of the weight carried by the moment—creatures who knew, with quiet certainty, that this was exactly where they were meant to be.

Mai-sa, who had seen much in her life, felt a shiver run down her spine. These were no mere serpents. She moved closer to the bed, her breath catching slightly in her throat. "They are... beautiful," she whispered, though the words felt inadequate. Slowly, she folded her hands in a gesture of respect and bowed before them, her lips murmuring a silent prayer.

For a few moments, the two women stood in silence, absorbing the gravity of the situation. The snakes, unbothered by their attention, remained still, their eyes never leaving my mother.

Mai-sa straightened after a long pause, casting one last glance at the snakes before turning back to my mother. "I knew," she said quietly, more to herself than to anyone else. "I knew this child was destined for greatness. The signs are undeniable. We must be vigilant, Devika. We must ensure that nothing disturbs this sacred path."

Her words remained, still and sacred, like an unspoken oath. Then, with a final look of approval at my mother, Mai-sa turned and left the room, her footsteps soft yet purposeful.

My mother, exhausted from the day's events, returned to the bed. She looked down at the snakes one last time, her heart no longer pounding with fear, but filled with an unshakable calm. "Thank you," she whispered to them again, her voice barely audible.

As she lay down to rest, the room dimmed, the soft glow from the oil lamp casting long shadows across the walls. Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the windows, but inside,

the air was still, thick with a sense of something divine hovering just beyond the veil of the ordinary.

Suddenly, as my mother began to drift off to sleep, she heard a faint sound—a soft hissing, like a whispered chant. The snakes, still beneath the bed, had begun to move, their bodies shifting slightly, speaking to one another in a language only they understood. The air in the room thickened once again, a strange, mystical energy swirling around.

My mother's eyes fluttered open, just in time to see the faintest flicker of golden light dancing across the room, emanating from the snakes. It was brief, like a spark of divinity, and then it was gone. She wasn't sure if it had been real or a dream, but she felt its warmth, its promise.

Downstairs, the household was abuzz with the news. "A divine child," the servants whispered among themselves. "Guardians from the heavens have arrived." But amid the joy and astonishment, there was a shadow—Aunt Damayanti. She stood alone in a corner, her eyes narrow, her lips pressed into a thin line. Her jealousy, once simmering, now threatened to boil over. And though no one saw it, the darkness in her heart was growing.

But for now, the protectors were watching, and no shadow could darken the light that had begun to shine in the Singh household.

The next morning, as the first light of dawn began to creep into the grand corridors of our ancestral home, Bua Mithila arrived, her presence a welcome calm amidst the rising tension in the household. She was known for her strength and her quiet, unshakable determination. As she made her way to Mai-

sa's room, her steps were deliberate, each one echoing in the quiet hallways like a soft prayer.

Upon reaching the doorway, she called out softly, "Mai-sa, may I come in?" There was both respect and a quiet urgency in her voice.

"Yes, Mithila, come in. I've been expecting you," Mai-sa replied, her voice carrying the familiar tone of quiet authority that filled every corner of the room.

Mithila entered, her gaze steady as she took in the scene. She sat gracefully beside Mai-sa, waiting patiently for the words she knew would follow. The air in the room was heavy with anticipation, and Mithila could sense that something monumental was unfolding.

After a brief silence, Mai-sa began, "Mithila, you've likely heard the news by now—Devika is pregnant. But this is no ordinary pregnancy. This child is special, and I cannot entrust this responsibility to just anyone. I need you to be by her side from the very beginning." Her voice was calm but carried an undeniable weight. "Revati is busy with her newborn, and Sumitra is still visiting her parents. I can trust no one but you to oversee this."

Mithila nodded, understanding the gravity of what was being asked of her. "Yes, Mai-sa, I will be by her side, and I will ensure that she delivers a healthy and strong baby." Her tone was firm, unwavering, but after a pause, she hesitated. "But, Mai-sa..." she added, her voice faltering slightly, "Is it true? What I've heard...about the snakes?"

Mai-sa's eyes softened for a moment as she looked into Mithila's face. "Yes, it is true." She recounted the story with

great care, narrating the strange dream, the appearance of the snakes, and the undeniable divine presence they had come to represent.

As Mithila listened, her initial fear subsided, replaced by a sense of understanding. She knew now that what lay ahead was not just a pregnancy, but a mystical event guided by forces far beyond their control.

When Mai-sa finished, Mithila bowed slightly, her hands folded in respect. "Thank you, Mai-sa. I understand now. I will stand by her." With that, she rose and quietly left the room, making her way to Devika's quarters, her heart filled with both reverence and resolve.

As Mithila entered my mother's room, the soft light of morning filtering in through the curtains, she called out gently, "Devika, are you here?"

"Yes, Didi!" my mother responded, quickly rising from her seat, her face lighting up with joy as she rushed to hug her sister-in-law. There was something deeply comforting in Mithila's presence, a maternal warmth that filled the room and made my mother feel as though everything would be alright.

"Oh, Devika," Mithila said with a smile, holding my mother close. "You're still like a child yourself," she teased softly. "And now you're going to be a mother. I hear you're carrying a great responsibility, hmm?" She looked at my mother with both affection and veneration, the weight of what had been shared with her still settling in her mind.

My mother's smile was radiant, but her voice came out soft, almost vulnerable. "Yes, Didi. At first, I was afraid... so

unsure. But ever since I found out I was pregnant, everything has changed. I feel different now. Stronger. And the snakes..." She paused, her voice deepening with reverence. "They give me courage. I never feel alone when they're with me."

Mithila's hand rested on hers gently. "You are not alone, Devika. We are all here for you." Her voice was steady, filled with the kind of reassurance that only someone as grounded as Mithila could offer. "Mai-sa has asked me to be with you throughout your pregnancy, and I promise you, I will do everything in my power to help you bring this child into the world."

There was a pause, and then Mithila's curiosity got the better of her. "Devika... the snakes. Are they here now? Can I see them?"

My mother nodded, gesturing toward the far corner of the room. There, one of the snakes lay coiled, its body still as stone, while the other two remained tucked behind the bed, barely visible. Despite their intimidating presence, the room felt calm, almost quiet.

Mithila, though usually unshakable, took a tentative step closer. "Well, aren't they something," She whispered with a mix of shock and disbelief. Then, after a pause, she smiled. "Do they have names yet?"

My mother shook her head, smiling softly. "No, Didi, I haven't thought about that."

Mithila chuckled lightly, her gaze still fixed on the snakes. "Well, if they're here to protect you, I imagine they're female. Strong, protective... like us."

A silence lingered for a moment before she continued, a soft smile forming on her lips. “Let’s call them the Matrikas. Our guardians, the protectors of mothers.”

My mother looked at Mithila with gratitude, the name resonating with her. “Matrikas,” she repeated softly, the reverence in her voice unmistakable. The name carried with it a weight of destiny and ancient reverence.

From that moment, the three snakes were no longer just silent, mystical creatures; they had an identity—a purpose. They were the Matrikas, protectors sent to safeguard the sacred journey of my mother and her unborn child.

For the next hour, the two women talked easily, the conversation flowing like water between them. They spoke of small, everyday things—Mithila’s children, life back home—but eventually, their conversation turned to the months ahead. They spoke in hushed tones about the changes that would come, the challenges they would face, and the unknown future that loomed before them.

As they spoke, the Matrikas lay quietly in the corner, their watchful eyes following the conversation with a strange, almost knowing calm. Their presence, once unsettling, had now become a source of comfort, a reminder that whatever lay ahead, they would not face it alone.

Later that evening, after the house had quieted down and the sun had long since set, my mother lay in bed, her thoughts filled with the day’s events. She rested her hand gently on her stomach, where the child she now felt so connected to was growing. The room was dark except for the faint flicker of the oil lamp in the corner, casting long shadows on the walls.

She closed her eyes, ready for sleep, but just as she was drifting off, she heard a soft, almost imperceptible hissing sound—the Matrikas, still coiled beneath her bed, whispering their ancient secrets in the language of serpents. The sound was soothing, like a lullaby from the divine.

And as my mother slipped into a deep, peaceful sleep, the sense of calm that had settled over the house remained. The Matrikas were watching. The journey had begun, and though the path ahead was uncertain, the forces guiding them were undeniable.

Days passed, and one quiet afternoon, the atmosphere in my mother's room was filled with a deep, serene calm. The weight of her pregnancy had begun to take its toll, and my mother, feeling fatigued, rested on her bed. Her voice was gentle but tired as she softly called for her attendant.

“Could you bring me some water, please? I feel parched,” she said, brushing a hand across her forehead, trying to wipe away the invisible weight of her fatigue.

The attendant nodded dutifully, her movements quick yet graceful as she left the room. Sunlight filtered through the window, casting a golden hue over everything, the stillness in the air mirroring my mother's languid state. But the tranquility of that afternoon was fragile—on the verge of being shattered by a danger no one had yet seen.

In the kitchen, Aunt Damayanti stood by the window, her gaze sharp and calculating. Her hands were busy preparing some pickles, but her mind was racing with thoughts far more dangerous than the simple act of cooking. Her resentment toward my mother had reached new heights ever since the

pregnancy had been confirmed. The joy that had enveloped the house was unbearable to her, and she watched from the shadows, consumed by envy.

“Damayanti Bhabhi, could you pass me a glass of water for Devika Bhabhi?” the attendant asked politely as she entered the kitchen, completely unaware of the seething hatred lurking beneath Damayanti’s composed exterior.

For a moment, Damayanti froze, her fingers tightening around the jar in her hands, the glass lid clinking ominously. She turned slowly, her face fixed in an expression of mock sweetness, though her eyes betrayed the storm brewing inside her.

“Oh, for your precious princess, is it?” she said, her voice sickeningly sweet, like honey laced with venom.

The attendant blinked, startled by the sharpness in Damayanti’s tone. Sensing something off, she stammered, “Forgive me, Bhabhi, I’ll get it myself.”

But Damayanti was quick to intervene, a sinister smile creeping across her lips. “Oh, don’t be so frightened! Here, grab that pickle jar for me,” she ordered, her voice now dripping with false kindness.

As the attendant turned her back to fetch the jar, Damayanti’s movements became swift and precise. She reached into the folds of her sari and retrieved a small vial hidden within. The liquid inside was clear and deadly—a poison she had been saving for just the right moment. Her hands moved deftly, pouring a few drops into the glass of water and stirring it quickly, careful not to spill a single drop.

The faint clinking of the spoon against the glass was almost lost in the heavy silence of the kitchen, but it appeared as though the very air had become thick with tension. With a satisfied look, Damayanti handed the glass back to the attendant, her eyes gleaming with cold satisfaction.

“Here, take this. Don’t keep your princess waiting,” Damayanti said, her voice now edged with sharp cruelty. She turned back to her task, brushing the moment aside like it meant nothing.

The attendant, none the wiser to the sinister plot she had just become a part of, hurried back to my mother’s room. As she entered, one of the Matrikas—one of the three guardian snakes—slithered silently across the floor, moving with a mystical grace. Its black scales glistened like polished obsidian as it placed itself directly in the attendant’s path, its yellow eyes fixed on the glass she held.

The attendant let out a startled gasp and instinctively leaped back to avoid stepping on the snake. In her hurry, the metal glass slipped from her hands, clattering loudly as it hit the floor, water splashing across the stone tiles.

The sharp clang of the metal glass hitting the floor stirred my mother from her light rest. Her eyes fluttered open, her brow furrowed with concern. “What happened? What’s going on?” she asked, her voice still heavy with sleep.

The attendant, her heart racing from the shock of the snake’s sudden appearance, stammered, “N-nothing, Bhabhi. The glass slipped. I’ll go fetch another one. Please give me a moment.” Her voice trembled as she spoke, her mind replaying the chilling encounter with the snake.

With a quick glance at the fallen metal glass, the attendant hurried out of the room, nearly tripping over her own feet as she fled. She ordered another servant to clean up the spilled water and rushed back to the kitchen, still shaken from the strange incident.

Unbeknownst to my mother, she had narrowly escaped a deadly fate. The Matrikas, her silent protectors, had intervened without a word, thwarting Damayanti's cruel plan. The poison, so carefully and meticulously plotted, never came close to her lips. The divine intervention of the Matrikas had prevented a disaster, their actions hidden within the mundane chaos of the spilled water.

Later that day, as Damayanti sat in her room, the news reached her that my mother had been unharmed, and her disappointment was instant and all-consuming. She had expected her plan to work flawlessly, but it had failed, and no one looked any the wiser. In her mind, the water had simply spilled by accident—a twist of bad luck. Her fists clenched, her nails digging into her palms as fury burned in her chest.

“This cannot be,” she whispered bitterly to herself, pacing the room like a caged animal. “Why did it fail? I had everything perfectly planned...”

She didn't know. She didn't understand the forces that protected my mother, the divine intervention of the Matrikas who had watched over her since the beginning. And though her first attempt had failed, Damayanti's hatred only deepened. For now, the snakes lay coiled beneath my mother's bed, their watchful eyes ever-present, their movements silent

yet filled with purpose. The divine plan continued to unfold, even as shadows of danger circled closer.

This was only the beginning.

As my mother entered her third month of pregnancy, small, inexplicable incidents continued to unfold, weaving a strange tension into the air that surrounded her. It was now April—a month caught between the gentle breaths of spring and the unforgiving heat of summer. The cool, soothing breezes of morning and evening slowly yielded to the dry, oppressive warmth of the afternoon, making the atmosphere dense.

One such afternoon, after a hearty lunch, my mother, feeling the fatigue of pregnancy, settled onto the soft leather couch that adorned her room. She had a book in her hands, but the warmth of the day wrapped around her like a thick blanket, pulling her into a deep, peaceful slumber. The room was quiet, save for the occasional rustle of the pages as her fingers twitched in sleep. Unbeknownst to her, something sinister had crept into the house.

It came disguised as a stray dog, slinking through the corridors unnoticed. Its gait was unnatural, its movements too fluid and deliberate for a common animal. The attendants, preoccupied with their duties, didn't see it pass. It moved with ghostly stillness, gliding across the floor, and soon found its way to my mother's room. There she lay, vulnerable in her sleep, unaware of the evil that crept closer with every breath.

The Matrikas, ever vigilant, sensed the intrusion immediately. They stirred from their quiet watch beneath the bed, their bodies coiling with anticipation. Their yellow eyes

flickered in the dim light as they quickly slid across the room, positioning themselves between my mother and the intruder.

The creature, still in the guise of a dog, took another step closer to my mother, its lips curled back, revealing unnaturally sharp teeth. The air in the room grew thick with malice as the creature's dark intentions became clear.

But before it could make its move, the Matrikas launched themselves at the creature in perfect unison, their scaled bodies moving like lightning. They coiled around the creature in a deadly dance, their hissing loud and fierce, filling the room with a ghostly sound that echoed off the walls. The creature thrashed violently in their grip, its form flickering as it struggled to maintain the guise of a dog.

The sound of the struggle snapped my mother out of her peaceful sleep. She jolted awake, her heart pounding as she tried to make sense of the scene before her. The sight of the Matrikas—her divine protectors—locked in a fierce battle with the creature left her frozen in place. The snake-like beings, which had once filled her with a quiet sense of peace, were now wrapped around a monstrous entity that let out an agonizing, unearthly cry.

Moments later, Mithila Bua came rushing into the room, her heart pounding with fear as the hissing and snarling noises guided her. She stopped dead in her tracks at the sight that greeted her. The creature—now exposed for what it truly was—lay dead on the floor, its body twisted in an unnatural, grotesque shape. The Matrikas, their work done, silently slithered back into the shadows, their eyes still glowing faintly as they retreated under the bed.

"My God!" Mithila Bua gasped, clutching the side of the doorway for support as the realization hit her. "What is this...?"

The creature's corpse lay crumpled at an odd angle, its form no longer resembling the dog it had pretended to be. As the servants were summoned to remove the body, they recoiled in horror at its appearance. The creature had two tails, one stacked grotesquely on top of the other, and its eyes were misaligned—one higher and larger than the other, giving it a distorted, almost nightmarish look. Its body twitched unnervingly, some residual energy remained trapped inside its malformed shell.

"What...what is this thing?" whispered one of the attendants, her voice barely audible as she stared in disbelief. None of the servants could explain what it was or how it had managed to enter the house, but the sight of its deformed body sent a chill through them all.

My mother had regained her composure by then, her heart filled with gratitude for the Matrikas who had once again saved her from harm. But the incident left a deep sense of unease in the house. The presence of this creature, whatever it had been, was a clear sign that dark forces were circling, intent on disrupting the divine path set before her.

Later that day, as Mai-sa entered the room to check on my mother, her face was etched with concern. She took one look at the disturbed expressions of the servants, and her worry deepened.

"Mithila, what happened? What is all this talk of a creature?" Mai-sa asked, her voice tight with alarm.

Mithila Bua stood, her face pale from the shock of what she had witnessed. “It wasn’t just a creature, Mai-sa. Something...something evil came into the house today. But Devika is unharmed, thanks to the Matrikas.”

At the mention of the snakes, Mai-sa nodded solemnly, her thoughts heavy. She turned to her attendants, her voice sharp with authority. “Be vigilant from now on. We cannot take any more chances with Devika’s safety.”

As the servants nodded and dispersed, Aunt Damayanti, who had been lingering near the entrance, overheard the entire exchange. A malicious smile played on her lips as she silently moved away. Here was her chance, her opening to spread doubt. She knew that Aunt Sumitra would be returning soon from her trip, and this incident would be the perfect tool to plant seeds of suspicion. Damayanti’s eyes gleamed with a dangerous light as she began plotting her next move, her heart brimming with resentment.

While the household remained focused on the strange event, the Matrikas slithered silently back into their hidden places, ever watchful, their divine protection an unspoken barrier between my mother and the shadows that lurked just beyond. Though the air remained heavy with unease, it was clear—no force, no matter how dark, could touch my mother while her protectors were near.

Two days later, when Aunt Sumitra returned home and made her way to her room, she found Aunt Damayanti waiting there—desperate, restless, her expression tense with something she could no longer keep to herself.

“Didi, I told you, there’s something wrong with Devika,” Aunt Damayanti whispered urgently to Aunt Sumitra, her eyes darting around the room as though the very walls might hear her. Her voice was low but filled with a fervor that suggested she had been holding this in for far too long.

She leaned in closer, the intensity in her voice rising like a slow flame. “Two days ago, a strange creature—something evil—entered the house and went straight to her room. And those snakes, they live with her, guarding her like they’re her servants. Do you really think all of this is normal?”

Aunt Sumitra, couldn’t hide the unease growing inside her. She had just returned after a long trip and wasn’t aware of the strange incidents that had been plaguing the household. Her brow furrowed, but she sighed softly, trying to maintain her composure. “No, Damayanti. We all know Devika is blessed. She’s carrying a special child. This is not something we should question lightly.”

But Damayanti wasn’t one to give up easily. She saw her moment and latched onto it with a fierceness that startled Sumitra. “Didi, you’re too naive. You also have a daughter—did anything like this ever happen to you? When you were pregnant, did snakes coil under your bed or strange creatures sneak into your room? Were you given this kind of special treatment?” Her voice was thick with jealousy, her frustration bubbling to the surface. “No. This is all part of Devika’s ploy to hide her true self from us.”

Sumitra, though beginning to doubt, still tried to hold onto the reason that usually guided her decisions. She glanced at Damayanti with concern, her mind wrestling between what

she knew and what was being suggested to her. “But Damayanti... if what you say is true, then we really don’t know what might happen next...”

The words lingered in the air like a dark omen, saturating the room with a tension so thick it pulsed with unspoken fear. Aunt Damayanti leaned even closer, her eyes gleaming with the satisfaction of planting the seed of doubt. “Exactly, Didi. It’s not safe anymore in this house. Anything could happen to any one of us at any moment.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but the weight of her words struck hard, sending shivers through Sumitra.

Before Sumitra could respond, the door creaked open, and Mithila Bua stepped into the room. Her tall figure, dressed in a simple yet elegant saree, commanded attention. Her gentle presence immediately softened the thick air of tension that Damayanti had stirred up.

“Sumitra, how are you? How’s your daughter?” Mithila Bua’s warm voice cut through the tension like a soothing balm, but she didn’t miss the worried expressions on their faces. She approached with care, as though sensing the unease floating in the room.

Sumitra shifted uncomfortably, her thoughts still muddled by the poison Damayanti had been feeding her. She couldn’t stop the question that had been gnawing at her. “Didi... do you think it’s safe here in the house?” Sumitra’s voice quivered slightly, betraying her anxiety. Her eyes, wide and filled with uncertainty, met Mithila’s calm, steady gaze.

Mithila Bua frowned, surprise flickering in her deep, wise eyes. “Who’s been putting such thoughts in your mind,

Sumitra? You've only just returned after four months, and we're all so happy to see you. Why would you be thinking like this?" Her tone was kind but firm, a gentle reprimand for entertaining such thoughts.

Before Sumitra could respond, Damayanti, ever the opportunist, jumped in to cover her tracks, her voice slick with false innocence. "Oh, Didi, she's just worried because of the dog incident. You know how it is with new mothers—they're always cautious, especially when there's a little one to protect." She cast a sideways glance at Sumitra, hoping to steer the conversation away from her earlier accusations.

Mithila Bua's eyes narrowed slightly as she turned her attention to Damayanti. There was a sharpness in her gaze now, a quiet, unspoken suspicion. "Sumitra, there's no need to worry. Nothing's going to happen to anyone. We're all safe here, including Devika. She needs your love and support now more than ever. I think you should visit her, give her your blessings, and welcome the child."

Sumitra, visibly relieved by Mithila Bua's calm assurance, nodded slowly. The fear that had gripped her heart began to loosen its hold, and she felt a wave of guilt for allowing Damayanti's words to sway her so easily. "You're right, Didi," she said softly, her voice steadying. "I'll go see her now."

The tension in the room began to ease, and soon the conversation shifted to lighter topics. They spoke of Sumitra's recent trip to her parents' home and the joys of new motherhood, the darkness of Damayanti's accusations fading into the background—at least for now.

But Damayanti's eyes, dark and brooding, still simmered with resentment. She sat quietly as the others chatted, but beneath her calm exterior, anger brewed like a storm on the horizon. She hadn't planted the seed of doubt as deeply as she had hoped, and it frustrated her to no end.

Meanwhile, as Sumitra made her way to my mother's room, a strange gust of wind blew through the hallway, bringing with it the scent of earth and rain, though the sky outside was clear. The Matrikas, ever watchful, sensed the tension but remained coiled in their hidden corners, waiting, watching, guarding.

Sumitra entered my mother's room to find her resting peacefully, her hands gently cradling her growing belly. The soft glow of the afternoon sun filtered through the curtains, casting a warm, golden light across the room. The air was thick with unspoken reverence, carrying the quiet awareness of the sacred life growing within my mother.

"Devika," Sumitra called softly, her voice filled with tenderness. "How are you feeling, sister?"

My mother opened her eyes slowly, a gentle smile gracing her lips. "I'm well, Didi. The baby is well."

Sumitra approached her with cautious steps, her earlier doubts now replaced by a quiet esteem. She knelt by my mother's side, placing a hand on her belly, feeling the faint flutter of life beneath her palm. "You are blessed, Devika," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "May this child bring joy and peace to all of us."

As they sat together, the room hummed with a quiet, unspoken power, a sense of something far greater than them

both. Outside, the wind rustled the trees gently, and the Matrikas, sensing that all was well, settled back into their watchful silence. But somewhere in the shadows, Damayanti's dark heart fumed, her hatred deepening with each passing day, waiting for the right moment to strike again.

Days passed, and the relentless heat of June settled over the household like a heavy blanket. My mother, now five months pregnant, could feel my movements within her, tiny flutters that reminded her of the growing life she carried. Each kick, each nudge, was a reassurance that the divine forces at play were very real. The household, too, had become accustomed to the silent, mystical presence of the three Matrikas, who slithered through the shadows, watchful and protective.

One scorching afternoon, the air inside the house felt dense, thick with both humidity and tension. My mother lay resting in her room, propped up on silk pillows, her eyes heavy with the weight of the heat and her growing child. The room was warm, with sunlight streaming through the cracks in the curtains, casting a soft, golden glow over the floor.

Mithila Bua entered the room quietly, carrying a silver glass of milk, her footsteps careful, as she approached my mother's bed. But before she could take another step, the Matrikas moved—three sleek, dark bodies gliding across the floor, positioning themselves between her and the bed. They hissed softly, their eyes glinting in the filtered sunlight, but they did not strike. They simply... blocked her path.

Mithila Bua stopped in her tracks, the glass of milk still in her hands. A chill ran down her spine, despite the heat. The

Matrikas had never stopped her before. She had grown accustomed to their presence, always allowing her to pass, even when she accidentally stepped too close. But today, the air carried something different. Their presence felt heavier, more deliberate—like a silent warning, or a shield against a threat she had yet to comprehend.

Her heart pounded in her chest, and she muttered under her breath, “What’s happening? Why won’t you let me pass?” Her eyes darted from one snake to the other, but they remained still, unyielding. She could feel the weight of their gaze, as though they could see something she couldn’t.

Just then, the door creaked open, and the head maid appeared, her face pale, her steps hurried. “Didi!” she called, her voice trembling. “Where’s the milk you took from the kitchen?”

Mithila Bua, still focused on the Matrikas, held up the glass in her hand. “Here. What’s the matter?” she asked, her voice tinged with confusion.

Without another word, the maid lunged forward, snatching the glass from Mithila Bua’s hands with surprising force. Before anyone could react, she hurled the glass to the floor. The milk splattered across the floor, soaking into the cracks, the silver glass rolling away with a clatter.

Mithila Bua stood frozen in shock, her mouth hanging open. the sound of the banging glass”broke the stillness in the room, sending a ripple of unease through the air. “What on earth are you doing?” she demanded, her voice sharp, frustration bubbling to the surface. “Why did you throw the milk on the floor?”

The head maid, trembling, pointed toward the kitchen, her hand unsteady—fingers quivering with the shock of what she had witnessed. "Didi... please... come with me. You need to see this."

Still bewildered, Mithila Bua followed the maid into the kitchen, her heart thudding in her chest, a sense of dread creeping over her. When they entered the kitchen, the sight that greeted them left her speechless.

There, floating in a large bowl of milk, was a dead lizard. Its pale, lifeless body bobbed in the milk, its tiny legs stiff and grotesque. A nauseating smell wafted through the air. Mithila Bua's eyes widened in horror as she turned to face Aunt Damayanti, who stood in the corner, her face pale, her head lowered, trying to avoid attention.

"Damayanti..." Mithila Bua's voice was low, but there was no mistaking the fury in her tone. She stepped closer, her hands clenched into fists. "You knew this milk was for Devika. Why didn't you check it?"

Aunt Damayanti's face flushed with frustration, but she kept her eyes averted, mumbling, "I... I didn't realize, Didi." Her voice was strained, her words barely audible. Inside, she was seething. Her plan had failed yet again, and it took every ounce of self-control to hide her disappointment. She forced herself to stay calm, unwilling to reveal the full extent of her malicious intent.

But Mithila Bua wasn't easily fooled. Her sharp eyes locked onto Damayanti, lips pressed into a hard, unyielding line. The air between them crackled—thick with tension, heavy with unspoken words. For a breathless moment, it felt like Mithila

Bua might say something final, something that would break the silence forever. But she didn't. Instead, she turned on her heel and walked away, her footsteps echoing like a verdict in the stillness she left behind.

Back in the room, the Matrikas had returned to their watchful silence. They had sensed the danger long before anyone else and acted accordingly, their presence once again ensuring that my mother remained unharmed.

As Mithila Bua re-entered my mother's room, the atmosphere had shifted. The oppressive heat of the afternoon hung heavier in the air—almost suffocating—and the room felt charged with something unseen. The Matrikas, who had blocked her path before, now lay still. Their coiled bodies were relaxed, yet their presence lingered, a silent warning woven into the air.

My mother's eyes widened, her hand instinctively moving to her belly, a protective gesture over the life growing within her. The weight of what had almost happened settled over her, heavy and dark, like a storm cloud pressing against her chest.

She glanced down at the Matrikas, who lay coiled at the foot of the bed, their watchful eyes still alert. She didn't need to say a word—the gratitude she felt radiated from her like a quiet prayer.

For the rest of the day, the incident was spoken of in hushed tones. The servants whispered about the dead lizard, the spilled milk, the narrow escape. But no one knew the full story. No one, except the Matrikas, who had once again intervened, silently guarding my mother and me from the shadows.

In the kitchen, Aunt Damayanti's frustration grew like a simmering fire, her mind already plotting her next move. She had been thwarted, but she was not done. Not yet. Her dark heart seethed with resentment, and the household, though unaware, was about to feel the full force of her hatred.

Then one day, elsewhere in the house, untouched by the brewing malice, a strange stillness settled.

My mother, Devika, sat by the window, her eyes distant and unfocused, gazing out into the approaching storm. Dark clouds swirled in the sky, the air heavy with the heat of the northern Indian summer. The room felt suffocating, weighed down by the strange energy that filled the space.

"Didi, I feel something is wrong today," my mother whispered, her voice trembling slightly, betraying her fear. "The snakes have been restless since morning. My stomach feels uneasy, and the baby... he's moving more than usual."

Mithila Bua approached cautiously, her brow creased with concern. She tried to offer comfort, but even her words carried a hint of uncertainty. "Don't worry," she said, her voice soft but steady. "As long as the Matrikas are here, nothing can harm you. Remember when that stray dog wandered in? They didn't hesitate for a moment—they protected you. They killed it before it could even get close."

My mother's face paled slightly at the memory. "Yes, I remember. I woke up to their hissing, and I was terrified. When I opened my eyes, they were coiled around the dog, fighting it... Today feels just like that day, Didi. There's something dark in the air."

Mithila Bua offered a gentle smile, though she couldn't hide her own growing unease. "Stay calm, Devika. I'm here with you, and I'm not leaving. You're carrying something sacred, something destined. These Matrikas are your guardians—they'll protect you with their lives. Even if I fail to notice something, they never will."

My mother nodded, but the weight of the unknown still lingered in her heart. "It's strange how they came to us, isn't it? The moment they appeared, I knew I would become a mother. I was so happy then... It's been five months, and they haven't left my side."

With each word she spoke, the room thickened—dense with meaning, heavy with silence. The tension in the air swelled, mirrored by the storm brewing outside. Distant thunder rumbled, underscoring the unease that had settled over the house.

Mithila Bua's thoughts drifted to past incidents. Each time, the Matrikas had acted swiftly—shielding my mother and me with a force that felt nothing short of divine. Yet despite their fierce nature, they never posed a threat to anyone in the family. Even when accidentally stepped on, they showed no malice—only a profound understanding of their duty.

Their conversation faded into silence as the weariness of the day took its toll. Both women drifted off to sleep, lulled by the wind outside and the weight of their unspoken worries. But soon, Mithila Bua woke up with a start. Something was wrong.

The room was in disarray, as though something powerful had torn through it. The air itself felt thick and oppressive, a

sharp contrast to the calm outside, where the sun was now setting, casting a soft golden light over the fields. My mother lay unconscious, her face pale, her breath shallow. And there, in the centre of the room, were the three Matrikas—coiled together in a strange, twisted pattern, their bodies entwined as though they had fought something unseen.

"Devika!" Mithila Bua's voice shook as she rushed to her sister-in-law's side, gently sprinkling water on her face. "Devika, wake up!"

My mother stirred, slowly regaining consciousness. Her voice, weak and distant, barely rose above a whisper. "Didi... what happened?"

"I don't know," Mithila Bua replied, her eyes wide with concern. "One moment everything was still, and then... it got dark all of a sudden. I felt this suffocating heaviness and couldn't stay awake. I don't know what happened, but look at the room."

She pointed toward the Matrikas, who were slowly uncurling from their entwined state, their movements sluggish and heavy with exhaustion. Every motion spoke of struggle. The sight was unsettling. Whatever had passed through the room had left its mark, and the Matrikas—my protectors—looked drained, their strength dimmed, their presence no longer invincible.

Something had happened, something powerful, and the air was thick with its lingering presence. But what? Neither Mithila Bua nor my mother had the answers. Only the Matrikas knew the danger they had faced... and conquered.

In the days that followed, while the world above whispered of omens and shadows, time slipped by—quiet and watchful—holding its breath, waiting for something only the heavens understood.

My mother was now eight months pregnant, and I could feel a strange, restless energy surging within me. My movements inside her belly were constant, driven by an inexplicable anticipation, though my memories from that time are hazy, fragmented like dreams fading upon waking. The only recollections I have are of profound silence and light—a divine stillness that enveloped me, cradled in the embrace of sacred waters.

In those fleeting memories, I find myself resting upon an enormous lotus, its soft, vivid pink petals supporting me like a bed. The lotus didn't feel like a separate entity; rather, it was an extension of me, connected to my navel, feeding me with a quiet, unknowable energy. I floated there, on that eternal lotus, free from fear, time, and thought. It was a world within a world—one of peace, warmth, and protection, far removed from the noise and chaos of the outside.

That serene scene shifts to another memory—one of a large, open hall within our family's mansion. The space is alive with preparation. Barefoot cousins dart across the polished floors, laughing as they run through the open space. Servants move swiftly, organizing the upcoming yagya, a sacred fire ritual. The heavy scent of the recent rains seeps into the air, mixing with the earthiness of wet soil, adding to the mystical atmosphere.

The hall is vast, open on three sides with paths leading to different wings of the mansion. The fourth side is covered with half-wet curtains that sway in the breeze, offering a partial view of the drenched grounds beyond. It is September, and the monsoon rains continue to flood the gardens. In the center of the hall, priests prepare the yajna kund, a square structure made of red bricks, filled with sand, where the sacred fire will soon be kindled.

Four priests stand near the sacred space, dressed in pristine white garments. The eldest, their guru, radiates authority, despite his frail body. His forehead bears the mark of spiritual power—a deep red tilak, placed between three horizontal white lines. The younger priests, his disciples, stand silently behind him, preparing for the ritual with utmost reverence.

A thick anticipation hangs in the air. The priests have gathered here to offer prayers for my mother's health and my safe arrival. Soon, women from the neighborhood will join, bringing their blessings and well-wishes for the sacred ceremony. The energy in the room is heavy with hope, reverence, and an unspoken anticipation of what's to come.

From afar, I can sense my mother's presence. She is a vision of unparalleled beauty, draped in a soft pink saree with a shimmering gold border that catches the light as she moves. Her long, dark hair is woven into a braid, adorned with fragrant jasmine flowers, filling the space with their sweet scent. Today, she glows, more radiant than ever.

Beside her, my Bua Mithila stands watchful, dressed in a deep green saree embroidered with gold patterns. Her eyes, usually sharp and alert, are softened today by the quiet joy of

this moment. She remains close to my mother, her presence as comforting and protective as ever.

The preparations for the yagya were nearly complete. The priests took their places around the yajna kund, faces solemn and glowing in the warm light of the flickering flames yet to be ignited. Outside, the rain had slowed to a soft patter, as though the heavens themselves had paused to witness the sacred ritual about to unfold. Inside the hall, everything was in place, and the air buzzed with an almost undeniable sense of anticipation.

One of the younger priests leaned toward another and whispered, "I've heard there are three snakes that guard Choti Bahu, Devika. They've been with her since the start of her pregnancy."

The other priest nodded, equally curious. "Yes, I've heard that too. Strange things have been happening in the house. The head servant, Haripal, was boasting in the market that Bai-sa will give birth to an angel."

Before they could continue, the head priest, stern yet calm, silenced their gossip with a single glance. "What are you three whispering about? Focus on your duties. Choti Bahu could arrive any moment."

One of the disciples, brimming with wonder, dared to ask, "Guruji, is it true that she carries an angel? She looks like Goddess Lakshmi herself."

The head priest, his gaze steady, replied in a measured tone. "We do not know what she carries, but it is clear that a great soul is about to enter this world. The events surrounding her suggest something beyond the ordinary. We are fortunate

to bear witness to this. Now, let's proceed with the preparations."

The hall began to fill with women and children, all adorned in their most beautiful traditional garments, their chatter hushed in excitement. And then, as my mother entered, the entire hall fell silent. Every eye turned to her, drawn by a presence so radiant it carried the grace of Goddess Lakshmi herself.

The way she moved, the grace she carried—it was as though a divine light radiated from her. Even in the fullness of pregnancy, she possessed an ethereal beauty that left no one untouched. The children, who had been running about just moments before, froze in place, their eyes wide in admiration.

A soft voice broke the silence. "Choti Bahu is like Goddess Lakshmi incarnate." The whisper spread through the crowd, accompanied by gentle nods of agreement and reverent smiles.

"Yes, she is our mother Lakshmi. Oh, bless us, Mother, with your grace and prosperity." Another voice echoed, as people bowed their heads in reverence.

The priests, moved by her presence, could barely contain their sense of marvel. One whispered to another, "Surely, we are in the presence of the divine."

"Choti Bahu," the head priest finally said, his voice filled with respect, "please be seated here." He gestured toward a flower-adorned chair, positioned at the center of the gathering.

My mother, her head held high with quiet dignity, moved toward the seat, her light pink saree shimmering in the soft glow of the atmosphere. As she sat down, her hands resting gently on her growing belly, the air around her held a quiet anticipation—an unspoken promise of what was to come.

As my mother sat gracefully in the hall, it felt as though time itself paused, allowing every gaze to rest upon her. Her gentle smile radiated warmth and hope, her hands folded in reverence as she silently sought blessings for me, her unborn child. There was a quiet dignity about her that held the room in a gentle embrace, as though the very air was softened by her presence.

In the corner of the room, my aunts gathered, their hushed gossip contrasting sharply with the solemn atmosphere of the ritual. Aunt Damayanti, never missing an opportunity to stir trouble, was weaving her familiar web of influence, her eyes narrowing with disdain as she whispered to Aunt Sumitra.

Aunt Damayanti leaned in, her voice laced with bitterness: “Didi Sumitra, did you get such royal treatment when your daughter was born? It’s as though Mai-sa has eyes only for Devika. We all have children too, but look how much attention she’s getting. Didi Savitri has sons and daughters, and you have a daughter as well.”

Aunt Sumitra, ever the wiser, shook her head, her voice calm but firm: “Damayanti, keep your voice down. If Mai-sa hears this, it won’t end well. Besides, look at Devika—she truly glows today. Maybe someone should put a black dot on her cheek to ward off the evil eye.”

Unfazed by the caution, Aunt Damayanti continued with her venomous words: “Oh please, Didi, she’s not the only beautiful woman in this house.” Your daughter is just as beautiful, if not more so! And let me tell you something else—Devika’s been drinking too much saffron milk. They say it’s to keep her skin fair. The milk that’s meant for the other children is going to her.”

Aunt Sumitra, who knew Damayanti’s manipulative nature all too well, sighed inwardly. Though more educated and well-read, Aunt Sumitra often found herself caught in Damayanti’s schemes. While Damayanti had stopped her education at a young age, Aunt Sumitra had completed her graduation and, like my mother, had aspirations that reached beyond the walls of the family mansion. Despite Damayanti’s constant negativity, Sumitra was a beacon of love and support in my life, standing as a second mother next to my own.

With a sharp glance at Damayanti, Aunt Sumitra hissed under her breath: “Be quiet, Damayanti. Mai-sa is coming.”

At that moment, the energy in the room shifted as my grandmother, Rajeshwari Devi Singh, entered the hall. Dressed in an elegant silk saree with only minimal jewelry, she moved with an effortless dignity, accompanied by her attendants.

As soon as she stepped inside, the room fell silent. All conversations ceased, even the bitter whispers of Aunt Damayanti. My grandmother’s love for my mother was apparent, and with her arrival, the attention shifted back to the sanctity of the moment, the importance of the blessings being bestowed upon the unborn child—me.

Mai-sa entered the room with her usual authority, her presence commanding attention. “What’s happening, Guru ji? Why haven’t the rituals started yet?” she asked, her tone gentle but firm.

The Head Priest, sensing her impatience, quickly replied, “Mai-sa, we were waiting for you. Let’s begin.” His attempt to conceal the slight delay was obvious, but in front of Mai-sa, no one dared to challenge her timing.

Mai-sa glanced around, her eyes landing on my mother. “Ah, there she is—my lovely princess,” she said warmly, her affection for my mother as clear as day.

In the corner, Aunt Damayanti, always the instigator, leaned toward Aunt Sumitra and whispered, “She’s the only princess, and what are we—her servants?” Her words dripped with bitterness, her envy still simmering beneath the surface.

Aunt Sumitra, more cautious, nudged her with an elbow. “Keep quiet! Don’t invite trouble,” she hissed, trying to diffuse the tension before it drew unwanted attention.

But nothing escaped Mai-sa’s notice. Her sharp gaze landed on Sumitra, and she asked, “What is it, Sumitra? Is everything alright? Don’t sit too close to Damayanti. She needs space to move around to ensure everything is in control. After all, she’s the most ‘responsible’ person in the house.” Her sarcasm was biting, and everyone in the room knew better than to cross her.

Aunt Damayanti could do nothing but murmur an apology. “Mai-sa, sorry,” she said, her voice low and defeated.

With order restored, the rituals commenced. The air filled with sacred chants, the soft crackle of fire, and the scent of

offerings being made to the gods. Everyone gathered around my mother, showering her with blessings and best wishes. As in many traditional Indian households, the conversation soon turned to predictions about the baby's gender.

An old lady, confident in her wisdom, proclaimed, "Mai-sa, I can bet Choti Bahu will have a baby boy. There's no doubt—all the signs are pointing to it."

But Mai-sa, always calm and composed, replied, "It doesn't matter to us. Boy or girl, we're happy either way. All that matters is that the baby is healthy."

As the rituals drew to a close, the mood in the house was one of contentment. However, beneath this tranquility, Aunt Damayanti's subtle schemes continued to bubble. What no one realized, though, was the extent of her jealousy and what it might drive her to do.

Yet through it all, the Matrikas remained ever-vigilant. They were invisible to most, but their quiet, powerful presence could be felt by those who paid attention—especially Bua Mithila, who had grown attuned to their protective energy. These guardians, ever watchful, appeared only when danger loomed or negativity threatened the household. And as the days passed, the anticipation of my birth hung thick in the air.

Each person in the household had their stories of encountering the Matrikas—strange yet comforting tales of these unseen protectors who guarded my mother and me. Even the servants whispered among themselves, recalling moments when the snakes made themselves known, always at just the right time to fend off any threat.

Chapter 4

First Breath, First Struggle

As the cold October afternoon unfolded, the air inside my mother's room grew tense. It was the 13th, and her labor pains had intensified with every passing hour. For three days, the dai-ma's had been taking turns, carefully observing her every movement. Despite their initial apprehension about the presence of the three guardian Matrikas, Bua Mithila had calmed their fears, and they had grown accustomed to their quiet watchfulness. Two dai-ma's, trusted for their experience and skill, had been summoned to ensure my mother's safe delivery. My father, having been informed that the time was near, stayed close, ready to welcome me into the world.

The room was cloaked in the flickering glow of candles, the soft light casting long shadows on the walls. By 1:00 PM, a chill had crept into the air, as though the very atmosphere understood the gravity of the moment. Pain wracked my mother's body, her cries growing louder with each wave. Bua Mithila, Aunt Savitri, and Aunt Gomti hovered close, offering what comfort they could. But it was Bua Mithila and Aunt

Savitri who carried the most experience and authority in this sacred moment.

One of the dai-ma's, her hair long turned white with age, moved with the precision of someone who had delivered countless children. Though her hands shook when idle, they became as steady as iron when her expertise was needed. She had inherited her knowledge from generations of midwives before her—wisdom passed down through her mother and grandmother. She knew which herbs to brew, which chants to murmur, and how to coax a hesitant child from the womb with the patience of someone in tune with nature's rhythm.

An hour passed. The room held its collective breath as the dai-ma exchanged knowing glances. They had sensed it—the time had come. My mother's cries grew piercing before falling abruptly silent as she fainted, her strength waning from the ordeal. Something far more profound occurred. Suddenly, a powerful force had swept through the room, everyone present lost consciousness. A deep, soothing silence filled the space, and in the midst of it all, the three Matrikas emerged, assuming their roles as divine midwives. It was they who delicately and effortlessly brought me into the world, their calm, knowing eyes watching me.

In that suspended moment of stillness, I opened my eyes. I was greeted by the soft, watchful smiles of the three Matrikas, who hovered around me like ancient protectors. Their gaze was still, filled with a gentle love and understanding that comforted me as I took my first breath. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, the Matrikas vanished, leaving behind a spectacle of light—a celestial shower of stars cascading around me.

My first cry shattered the lingering silence. The women in the room stirred, startled awake—released from whatever stillness had gripped them. “It’s a baby boy! It’s a baby boy!” echoed through the hall, carrying with it a rush of tears, joy, and long-awaited relief. My arrival had not only shattered the silence but marked the completion of the Matrikas’ sacred duty.

The dai-ma’s, regaining consciousness along with the others, looked at each other in bewilderment, still processing the strange events that had just transpired. One of them spoke up, “Didi, did you see what happened?” The other dai-ma, though equally puzzled, could only nod in agreement. “I’ve never witnessed anything like it,” she replied, eyes wide. “But this child... there’s something about him. It felt as though he came directly from the heavens. I couldn’t stop looking at him, like he belonged to all of us.” Their voices carried a sense of reverence.

As they hurried to spread the news to my father and grandfather, the household erupted in jubilant shouts and prayers. The room overflowed with well-wishes and blessings, and gifts were showered upon the dai-ma’s for bringing such joyful news. My father, Devendra Singh, was overwhelmed with happiness, unable to hide his emotions as he received endless congratulations from family members and neighbors alike.

However, what the dai-ma’s, the aunts, or even my father couldn’t know was the story that unfolded in those brief, silent moments before my cry. During that instant when everyone fainted, I saw everything—the entire nine-month journey of my mother’s pregnancy through the eyes of my

protectors, the Matrikas. It was they who had guarded me, keeping me safe from harm, enduring countless threats and challenges to ensure I was born into this world unharmed. I could see their struggles, their relentless efforts, and the love they poured into protecting me.

But what stood out most vividly was Aunt Damayanti—her relentless attempts to harm my mother. She had tried twice to poison her during the pregnancy, hoping to end my life before I could be born. Driven by jealousy and her desire to ensure that her own child would be the firstborn after Aunt Savitri's children, she sought to remove any competition, convinced that the first boy would hold the highest place in the family. Aunt Damayanti believed that this would elevate her status, securing her position within the household.

Yet, she never stopped to consider that her actions would bring misfortune upon herself. The curse of her malice became evident when she remained unable to conceive for twelve years after my birth. Every remedy she tried, every prayer offered at temples—nothing could reverse the ill fate she had brought upon herself.

And through it all, Aunt Sumitra, unaware of Damayanti's cruel intentions, remained innocent. If she had known, she would have confronted her, and Damayanti would have faced the full brunt of Sumitra's anger. Instead, Aunt Sumitra poured her love into me, treating me as her own son. For her, my birth was a blessing, as she had always longed for a son.

The bitterness that drove Damayanti's actions stemmed from a deep-seated insecurity, an obsession with being at the top of the family hierarchy. She believed that by securing her

child's status, she would rise in the family. But as the events of the past months revealed, destiny had other plans. Her selfish desires and obsession blinded her to the larger forces at work, leading her to make foolish decisions that would haunt her for years to come.

In the end, it was not her schemes or ambitions that triumphed, but the divine forces—the Matrikas—who ensured that I was born safely, fulfilling the destiny that had been written long before I entered this world.

Days passed, and I was now two months old. My days were spent in the care of Mai-sa, who was utterly devoted to me. I can still vividly recall the first time she held me—time stood still. She gazed at me, her eyes welling with tears. For nearly half an hour, she held me close, her emotions spilling out, until her attendant gently shook her back to reality. Mai-sa's attachment to me ran so deep that no one in the household could miss it.

Every day, I was massaged with essential oils to strengthen my bones, an important ritual that everyone believed would ensure my healthy growth. Two or three people were always around, making sure I never had a reason to cry. My mother, though deeply loving, only spent time with me at night or when she would come to feed me during the day. The rest of my time was filled with the joy of being passed from one pair of loving hands to another, all trying to elicit smiles from me.

No matter who was near me, their intentions were never questioned—I looked at them all with love, a smile always dancing on my lips. Some would bring toys from the local market, while others would craft little playthings from

whatever they could find, all with the single aim of making me happy. My laughter was the light that filled our home.

Out of everyone, I shared a special connection with my cousin Kalindi, Aunt Sumitra's daughter. From the very beginning, there was an unspoken bond between us—one that only deepened with time. Kalindi and I were inseparable, and though we were cousins, many mistook us for siblings because of how close we were. Aunt Sumitra treated me like her own son, showering me with as much love and care as she did her daughter. You could sense the bond we shared—it didn't need words, only presence.

But lurking in the shadows was Aunt Damayanti, her jealousy simmering just beneath the surface. She couldn't stand the love Aunt Sumitra and Kalindi showered on me. Every smile I received from them only stroked her hatred. While her heart burned with the desire to harm me, she was powerless to act, as I was always surrounded by loving eyes and protective hands. Yet, her gaze often lingered on me, her intentions dark, waiting for an opportunity that, thankfully, never came.

This was how I grew—surrounded by love, but not untouched by envy. The warmth of my family shielded me, but Aunt Damayanti's silent malice was a shadow that remained, watching, waiting.

One day, my father arrived home with great excitement, announcing that his application for a transfer to the big town had been accepted. He quickly sought the approval of my grandparents to take my mother and me with him. After some

detailed discussions and convincing, they finally agreed. With their blessing, he turned to my mother, his joy overflowing.

"Devika, do you know? We can move to the big town now! My transfer has been approved," he said, his voice brimming with enthusiasm.

My mother, though happy, was still cautious. "But do you think it's the right time for us to move?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Yes, Devika. Why not? It's the perfect opportunity. We'll be moving to the town where your maternal uncle lives. You'll have many relatives nearby, and we also have extended family there. Plus, our child needs both of us now," my father reassured her with warmth in his voice.

The idea sparked a light in my mother's eyes. "Oh, that means I can resume my studies once things settle down," she said, her voice lifting with hope.

"Yes, Devika, absolutely. We'll find a place near your college so you can manage both—our child and your studies," my father replied, already imagining the future.

Together, they began making plans, mapping out the next steps for their little family. As they drifted into sleep, the excitement for what lay ahead filled the room.

The next day, my father left for the big town, which was about five hours away by bus. He settled into his new post and worked on securing accommodations before coming back for us. After a month, he returned to bring us with him.

Mai-sa was heartbroken to see me leave. Tears flowed freely not just from her eyes, but from the eyes of all those who had

become attached to me. For three months, I had been the center of their lives. They had cradled me in their arms, showered me with affection, and made it their mission to see me happy. The thought of my departure cast a wave of sadness over the entire household, but it was a necessary step for the next chapter of our lives.

The big town was not far from our ancestral home. A scenic five to six-hour drive through the rolling hills, passing by glistening dams and lush landscapes. My father had recently been posted there, though he hadn't yet secured a government apartment, so we settled into a modest, rented place on the first floor of a house in the middle of town. The ground floor was vacant as the owner, who lived elsewhere for business reasons, rarely occupied it.

Our new home was a bit enclosed but sufficient for us. The first-floor layout was simple yet intriguing. A small main hall faced the street, with a front roof overlooking the bustle below. Behind the hall, another roof led to a stairway descending to the courtyard and backyard, connecting various parts of the house. A larger staircase climbed to an isolated room further away on the same floor. Between our room and this distant one was a vast, empty courtyard—spacious enough to park two cars. Although this space belonged to the house's owner, it was rarely used, lending us a sense of privacy.

The courtyard also housed a small washing area that led to the backyard, which was our primary entrance. Entering from the backyard, we passed the washrooms on either side before stepping into the open courtyard. A split staircase branched toward two rooms—our family's room on the right and the distant room on the left, occupied by an older gentleman, a

senior officer in my father's department. He was a kind and supportive figure, a friend of my father's, and instrumental in securing this house for us, which helped ease our transition to the new town.

Soon enough, we settled into a rhythm and began to acquaint ourselves with the neighborhood. My mother, always proactive, hired two sisters—Geeta and Sunita—to help with household chores. They stayed with us from morning until evening, caring for me while my mother attended to other tasks. These two young women became an important part of our daily lives, always attending to my needs and ensuring the smooth running of the household. My mother, with a heart full of hope, also resumed her studies, enrolling in a nearby college as part of her long-held dream to complete her education.

This town was my mother's hometown, but it wasn't a place she had fond memories of. She had lost her father at a young age and was raised by her wealthy maternal uncle. Her uncle was a well-respected businessman, running a large transport company and managing a household that was always bustling with activity—parties, gatherings, and a fast-paced never-ending lifestyle. Although she grew up in that household, my mother never felt fully comfortable there.

Unlike her cousins, who reveled in the lively atmosphere of constant celebrations, my mother preferred solitude. As a child, she recalled how she would often escape to a quiet corner of the rooftop, creating a small space for herself where she could focus on her studies, away from the distractions of the world below. While the rest of the household embraced indulgence, my mother remained serious about life and

deeply spiritual. It was this contrast that set her apart—she carried a calm serenity and devotion, in stark opposition to the fast-paced world around her.

The new town brought back memories, but now, as a mother and a student once more, my mother could carve out a new path for herself, supported by my father and a small circle of caring individuals.

At five months old, I was already showing signs of becoming a fast learner. I had started sitting on my own, without any support, and this newfound independence turned into an endless source of amusement for the people around me. I would sit and jump up and down in place, just like a tiny frog, determined to move despite being in one spot. Everyone would laugh at my dedication, especially Geeta and Sunita, who spent most of their time chasing after me, completely worn out by my boundless energy.

My curiosity knew no bounds. Every object within reach attracted my attention, and I had an insatiable need to explore and taste everything. Whether it was colorful trinkets or even medicines left carelessly around the house, I would grab them and put them in my mouth. It has to be a miracle that I never came to any serious harm. Occasionally, I would get sick, running high fevers that scared those around me. But, within hours, I'd be back to my usual mischief, as if nothing had happened.

As I grew, my mother found it increasingly difficult to balance caring for me with her studies. That's when my maternal aunt, Prabha, became an important part of our household. She was taller than my mother, with a wheatish

complexion and a gentle, soft-spoken nature that made her instantly lovable. Aunt Prabha had an almost motherly bond with me, and she dedicated herself to making sure I was well-fed, despite my notorious habit of eating very little.

She had her own creative method of feeding me. Her most effective technique was to pin me between her legs so I couldn't wriggle away. With one hand, she'd hold my mouth open, and with the other, she would gently pour the milk. Her patience was endless, and she treated me like I was her own child. If I woke up crying in the middle of the night, it was Aunt Prabha who would rush to comfort me first, holding me close until I fell back asleep.

Together, Geeta, Sunita, and Aunt Prabha became my new guardians, constantly watching over me with love and care. There was something I noticed about these people who spent time with me—it felt like they became enchanted. The longer they stayed with me, the more they grew to love me, like an invisible bond was forming between us. Their affection for me was pure, driven by a genuine connection. It was a strange feeling, but a comforting one, knowing I was surrounded by love from those who would do anything to protect me.

By the time I was seven months old, I had started crawling, pulling myself up with support, and becoming more adventurous than ever. Crawling became a new thrill for me—like gliding through a fast-moving river. But with this newfound freedom came challenges for everyone around me. The house we lived in had a staircase with fifteen steep steps, and this led to my first major accident, a moment that left its mark in my memory.

The morning had started like any other, with the usual rhythm of a household in motion. My mother, Devika, was preparing to leave for her college, balancing the responsibilities of a young mother and her ambitions. My father had already left for work, and Geeta and Sunita, the household helpers, were busy with their chores—Geeta in the courtyard, sweeping away the dust, and Sunita, clattering about in the kitchen as she prepared the afternoon meal. The gas delivery man arrived, dropping off a new cylinder, his presence barely noticed amid the bustling activity.

In that small window of time, when no one was watching, my curiosity got the better of me. I toddled toward the open staircase, fascinated by the world that lay beyond the first few steps. At my age, the staircase looked like an adventure, a path to discovery. Without hesitation, I began to descend. The moment I lost my balance was the last calm moment anyone in the house would experience that day.

Suddenly, I was tumbling down the stairs. My small body hit each step with a sickening thud, my head bouncing against the rough stone. The world spun violently, and the sharp sting of pain blurred my senses. I remember nothing but the sound of my own cries, piercing the air, mingling with the dull throb of each strike against the stairs.

Blood poured from my forehead, staining the steps in deep crimson streaks. I tumbled a few more steps before coming to a stop, crumpled and helpless in the middle of the staircase. My cries echoed through the house, filling every corner with a sense of dread.

Geeta was the first to hear me. Her broom clattered to the floor as she ran, her heart pounding in her chest. Sunita followed, her hands trembling as she wiped them hastily on her apron. But it was *Tripathi Uncle*, who had just been leaving for work, who reached me first. He was a tall, imposing figure, usually calm and collected, but today his face was etched with terror.

Without a word, he scooped me up in his strong arms, holding my tiny, bloodied body close to his chest. His eyes, wide with panic, flickered over the wound on my head, the blood still flowing, soaking through his shirt.

"His head! It's bleeding—badly!" His voice was tight with fear as he barked instructions. "Get me a clean cloth—fast! We need to stop the bleeding!"

Geeta, her hands trembling uncontrollably, tore a piece of fabric from her scarf. "Here, Uncle," she whispered, barely able to get the words out.

"Kerosene. Dip it in kerosene!" Tripathi Uncle ordered, his voice shaking but firm.

Sunita, normally so composed, fumbled as she hurried to soak the cloth in kerosene. The smell hit her nose sharply, making her stomach churn, but there was no time to think. She handed the cloth back to Tripathi Uncle, her hands still trembling.

Tripathi Uncle pressed the cloth to my forehead, trying desperately to stem the flow of blood. The room stood still, each second dragging painfully on as they waited for a sign—anything—that the bleeding was under control. My cries had quieted to a whimper, my energy fading fast.

My mother, who had just emerged from her room, stood frozen in the doorway. Her eyes widened in horror as they fell on me, cradled in Tripathi Uncle's arms, blood soaking the cloth at my forehead. Her chest heaved as she tried to process the scene before her.

"Geeta! Sunita!" she cried out, her voice breaking with a mixture of rage and helplessness. "How could you leave him alone like this?"

Geeta's lips trembled, but no words came. Sunita turned her face away, her own tears beginning to fall. But no one answered. They were too consumed by the gravity of the situation, too shocked by how quickly disaster had struck.

Without wasting another moment, Tripathi Uncle bolted down the stairs with me in his arms. My mother followed close behind, her feet barely touching the ground as she ran after him. Outside, an auto rickshaw was flagged down, and Tripathi Uncle climbed inside, holding me tightly. My mother clambered in beside him, her hands shaking as she gently touched my cheek, her face pale with fear.

The ride to the hospital felt endless. The rickshaw jolted over potholes and uneven streets, the driver weaving through afternoon traffic as fast as he could. My mother held me tighter, her sobs now quiet—contained, as though releasing them would somehow make everything worse.

At the hospital entrance, my father appeared, his face drained of color. He didn't say a word as he helped lift me from the rickshaw. There were no words to convey the terror in his heart, the gut-wrenching fear of losing his child.

Inside the sterile walls of the hospital, time stretched like an eternity. The smell of antiseptic filled the air as they waited, the moments dragging on painfully. My mother and father clung to each other, their hearts pounding in sync with the faint beep of the machines in the background.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, the doctor emerged. His face was calm, but his words hung in the air like a fragile lifeline.

"Your child is stable now," he said gently. "He has four stitches on both sides of his forehead. He'll be fine."

The words washed over my parents like a balm. My mother exhaled a long, shaky breath, tears flowing freely down her cheeks now, but these were tears of relief.

"Can we see him?" she asked, her voice soft, barely able to contain the emotion.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "He's unconscious now, but he'll be awake soon."

When my parents entered the room, they approached my tiny, bandaged body with tentative steps, as though even the sound of their feet might disturb the fragile peace. My father placed a hand on my mother's shoulder, their silent presence saying more than words ever could.

Hours passed before I finally stirred. When my eyes fluttered open, the room appeared to exhale with relief. My mother rushed to my side, her hand gently brushing my cheek, her heart swelling with gratitude.

"Thank God," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. My father stood behind her, his expression a

mixture of joy and exhaustion. Tripathi Uncle, still lingering nearby, finally allowing himself a small, relieved smile.

"You saved his life," my father said, his voice low but heavy with gratitude. He turned to face Tripathi Uncle, his eyes brimming with unsaid emotion. "We owe you everything."

"No thanks needed," Tripathi Uncle replied, his voice cracking slightly. "He's our angel. We'll all keep him safe, always."

Later that evening, we returned home. The atmosphere was subdued, the weight of what had nearly been lost hanging in the air like a shadow. Geeta and Sunita, who had hardly spoken since the accident, now took turns watching over me, their casual care replaced by an almost obsessive vigilance. The house resumed its routine, but something had changed. Every movement, every breath I took, was closely monitored, as though life itself had become too delicate to trust.

Time sprinted by, and before anyone could fully comprehend the whirlwind of events, my tenth month arrived, bringing with it a new level of mischief. By then, I had not only mastered walking but strutted with the confidence of someone who believed he could measure the world with each tiny, deliberate step. My tiny legs carried me wherever my curiosity led, and for those around me, it was a pity that they had no hope of keeping up.

By my first birthday, I had already staked my claim over the art of climbing, and keeping an eye on me became a task that left my caretakers utterly exhausted. My curiosity bloomed alongside my growing physical prowess, presenting

new challenges for my family. With each step, I tested the limits of my world.

The roof of our house, which overlooked the bustling street, became my playground. It was bordered by a beautifully ornate railing with oval-shaped cement pillars, each hand-carved with care. They created a delicate pattern that lent the house both an air of elegance and openness. To me, though, those pillars were not barriers—they were a gateway to the bustling world below, a world I could interact with. And so, I began what would become my most notorious mischief: throwing things through the railings.

Of all the objects I could have chosen, it was gold that fascinated me the most. Anything shiny was fair game, and my mother's cherished gold ornaments, symbols of wealth, pride, and tradition in India, soon found themselves sailing through the air, tumbling to the street below. At first, it was just an occasional nuisance, but as my antics grew bolder, entire pieces of jewelry began disappearing—sometimes they were found by a familiar neighbour who kindly returned them; other times, they were simply gone—swallowed by the chaos below.

Our house became infamous, known as the place where "gold rains from above." Neighbors would glance upward in expectation whenever they passed by, some hoping to catch a glimpse of the next shiny offering. They'd smile knowingly or chuckle, but for my mother, this was a disaster.

In Indian culture, gold isn't just an adornment—it holds immense sentimental and cultural significance. Each piece is a part of family history, a symbol of tradition and divine

protection, often passed down through generations. Watching me toss her treasured jewelry into the street broke my mother's heart. She did her best to keep the gold hidden, stashing it away in secret places, but I always looked to find it. I had an instinct for locating the one thing I wasn't supposed to touch.

One afternoon, after realizing another precious bangle had gone missing, my mother stood at the edge of the roof, scanning the street below in exasperation. "Oh God! How can one child cause so much trouble?" she murmured to herself, trying to keep her composure.

Geeta, who was helping my mother search, tried to console her. "Bhabhi, he's just a baby! Don't worry. We'll find the bangle. The neighbors must have seen it."

But my mother sighed deeply, her eyes filling with tears. "It's not just about the bangle, Geeta. It's... it's everything. Every piece of jewelry has a memory, a story. I can't lose them like this..."

Geeta gave a quiet nod, fully aware of the weight the moment carried.

But my love for gold wasn't my only mischief. My curiosity was boundless, and one fateful afternoon, it led me to a new adventure. I had spotted an umbrella hanging from a hook on the ceiling, and my mind was set on getting it. However, the only way up was to climb over the wooden television set that stood in the room.

Determined, I reached out and grabbed the edge of a large metal box nearby, pulling myself up onto the television, my small body teetering dangerously. As I reached for the

umbrella, my balance faltered. Suddenly, the world tilted, and before I knew it, the television and I came crashing to the floor in a deafening thud.

My head struck the ground with a sickening crack, the sharp pain immediately searing me. Blood began to pool at my forehead, and once again, my cries filled the house.

Geeta and Sunita burst into the room, their faces pale with panic. “Oh my God! He’s bleeding!” Sunita cried, rushing toward me, her hands shaking as she tried to assess the situation.

My mother came running in next, her heart nearly stopping at the sight of me, blood pouring from a deep gash in my head. “No, no, no! Not again!” she sobbed, her voice trembling. “Someone get help! Please!”

Within minutes, Tripathi Uncle arrived, having been called in a frenzy. His calm demeanor wavered as he looked at the mess before him—me, lying on the floor, blood covering my forehead and the shattered pieces of the television scattered around. Without hesitation, he scooped me up in his arms, his expression a mixture of urgency and fear.

“We need to get him to the hospital, fast,” he said, his voice tight. “He’s lost a lot of blood.”

The ride to the hospital felt like an eternity for my mother, who sat in the back of the rickshaw, clutching me to her chest, her tears falling silently onto my head.

At the hospital, the doctor acted swiftly. After what felt like an eternity of anxious waiting, he finally emerged, his expression calm and reassuring. “He’s lucky,” he said, gently

lifting the bandage to inspect the fresh stitches on my head. “Six stitches this time—but he’ll be just fine.”

Relief flooded through my parents, but the terror of the day lingered in the air like a dark cloud. My father stood beside my mother, their hands clasped tightly as they both exhaled, still shaken.

Later that evening, when we returned home, the house was unusually quiet. The once-bustling environment had been replaced with a tense calm. Geeta and Sunita, who had always taken such joy in watching me play, now eyed me with a new wariness.

Where there was once laughter at my mischief, there was now a nervous energy that filled the air. Everyone knew—life with me meant bracing for the next disaster. Every step I took felt like a challenge to fate itself, and while I was too young to understand the full weight of my actions, I could sense that the world around me had shifted.

I continued to explore, to test my boundaries, but in the eyes of those who loved me, there was now a quiet fear that followed.

One evening, as the soft evening light filtered through the clouds, I was playing on the roof, my attention captured by the fluttering of something overhead. My eyes followed the erratic flight of a bat, swooping down low and soaring back up into the air. The sight fascinated me, its wings casting fleeting shadows on the ground. I stood still, my small hands eager, waiting for the right moment. Suddenly, the bat swooped down close enough for me to grab it. My fingers wrapped around its soft, leathery wings.

Excited by my catch, I rushed to my mother, cradling the creature with pride, unaware of its true nature. “Maa, birdie!” I exclaimed, my voice bursting with the innocent thrill of discovery, holding up the squirming bat like it was a treasured prize.

My mother’s eyes widened in horror. For a moment, she was frozen, her mind racing between disbelief and fear. “Oh God, where did you get that? Let it go!” she gasped, trying to steady her voice, though her hands trembled as she reached out toward me.

“Maa, birdie!” I repeated, stubborn in my joy, oblivious to the danger in my hands.

“That’s not a bird, it’s a bat!” she shouted, her fear breaking through her calm façade. Without wasting another second, she lunged forward, her hands moving with a speed and precision only fear could summon, prying the creature from my grasp. The bat wriggled free and took flight once again, disappearing into the dusky sky. But as the creature left, the seed of worry within my mother grew deeper—she realized how unaware I was of danger, how my curiosity could lead me into harm's way.

But that wasn’t the height of my mischief.

One early morning, well before the rest of the house had stirred from their sleep, I wandered out into the courtyard. My tiny feet padded softly on the cool stone floor, the world around me still heavy with the quiet of dawn. The sky was beginning to soften, and the first rays of sunlight peeked through the horizon, casting a gentle glow over the courtyard.

I was wide awake, my senses alive to the possibilities of this early morning adventure.

The air was fresh and crisp from the lingering night, and the courtyard was mine to explore. That's when I saw it—a cobra, its sleek, smooth body coiled lazily in a corner. To my innocent eyes, it was just another fascinating creature in this vast world of discovery. Its body glistened in the soft light, the scales shining like polished armor, and its head rested atop its coils, calm and unmoving.

I giggled with delight. "Friend!" I said, the word tumbling out with childish joy. I approached it without a second thought, my tiny hands reaching out with pure curiosity. Laughing with the untainted innocence of a child, I picked it up, grabbing the cobra by its head, holding it high as though it were a newfound toy. My fingers brushed against its cold, smooth skin, and I marveled at the way its tongue flickered, curious and quick.

The cobra, surprisingly still, didn't struggle at first, almost as though it sensed my ignorance. I giggled again, fascinated by the strange creature in my hands, entirely oblivious to the danger coiled within its deceptively calm demeanor.

It was then that Geeta entered the courtyard.

The moment she saw me, her face drained of all color. Her mouth opened, but for a moment, no sound came out. Then, piercing the silence of the morning, a scream erupted from her—a scream so raw and filled with horror that it sliced through the stillness like a blade.

"Bhabhi! Bhabhi!" she shrieked, her voice rising in panic, echoing through the house.

Her screams tore through the house, jolting my parents from their sleep. They shot up in bed, their hearts racing before their minds had even fully grasped what was happening. The urgency in Geeta's voice sent them racing down the stairs, their feet pounding against the floor, their breaths coming fast and shallow.

When they reached the courtyard, they froze.

There I was—sitting in the middle of the stone courtyard, a wide, innocent smile spread across my face. In my hands was the cobra, its body dangling in my grasp, its hood still flared, eyes alert and cold.

For a moment, the world around us stood still. My mother's breath caught in her throat, her heart pounding so violently she feared it might burst. Her legs gave way beneath her, and a wave of sheer terror held her suspended. She stood frozen, her trembling hands clutching Geeta's arm for support as tears welled up in her eyes.

My father, usually the pillar of calm and control, was rooted to the spot, his face drained of all color. His hands shook uncontrollably, his gaze fixed on me. He had faced many crises in his life, but nothing—nothing—could have prepared him for this moment.

I, on the other hand, was blissfully unaware of the panic I had caused. To me, it was just another game. I laughed as the snake's smooth skin wriggled in my hands, its cool body slithering against my fingers. I giggled with excitement, wanting to play, to follow wherever the snake might go. The fear in my parents' eyes was a language I did not yet understand.

“Rana... no,” my mother’s voice cracked, barely more than a whisper. She couldn’t move. Tears streamed down her face as she reached out toward me, her hands trembling.

Just then, Sunita burst into the courtyard. Her eyes widened with disbelief as she took in the scene before her—me, her tiny charge, holding a cobra with a carefree smile. The blood drained from her face.

“Rana!” she screamed, her voice filled with raw terror. “Bhabhi, no!”

The scream startled the cobra. It flinched in my grasp, its hood spreading wider, its body tensing. For a brief moment, everything hung in the balance. The world held its breath... Time stalled in her chest, her heart silenced by fear. The cobra, now fully alert, turned its head, taking stock of the sudden chaos erupting around it.

And then, as though guided by some unseen force, the cobra began to slither from my hands. Its cold body slipped free from my fingers, its tongue flickering in and out as it slowly made its way across the courtyard. My parents, still frozen in place, watched in disbelief as it slithered past Sunita, who collapsed in a faint, unable to bear the shock.

The courtyard fell silent, the air thick with the tension that had only just begun to release its hold.

The moment the cobra slithered out of sight, my mother rushed forward, trembling uncontrollably. She scooped me into her arms and held me like I was fate returning to her arms. Her entire body shook with sobs she could no longer contain, and as she buried her face in my hair, her tears burned hot against my skin.

I squirmed in her arms, protesting, wanting to follow the snake. “Maa, Friend! Maa Friend!!” I reached out, my small hands still eager with curiosity. I didn’t understand why she was crying, why everyone was so afraid.

But my mother held me tighter, her grip firm, refusing to let me go. “No... no, beta,” she whispered through her sobs, her voice thick with emotion. “You’re safe now... you’re safe.”

She rocked me gently, her prayers spilling from her lips in a quiet, trembling murmur.

In that moment, I was a free spirit—driven by a boundless curiosity, a thirst for exploration, an innocent desire to run toward the unknown. I was too young to recognize the dangers lurking in the world, too naive to understand the fear that gripped the hearts of those around me.

But my mother—my fierce, protective mother—knew. She had seen the danger, had felt the icy grip of terror that came with the sight of her child holding a cobra. She had pulled me back from the brink, her love shielding me from the harm I couldn’t yet comprehend.

Though I didn’t realize it then, she was my guardian, holding me close, keeping me safe from a world that could harm me. And even as I longed to chase after the snake, she held on, her love stronger than the forces that pulled me toward the unknown.

As I grew, my behavior continued to both fascinate and puzzle those around me. There was something about me that set me apart—an energy, a presence that didn’t quite belong to the ordinary world. My family couldn’t quite put their finger on it, but they saw it in the way animals gravitated towards

me, how I connected with them in ways that defied explanation.

One lazy afternoon, the courtyard buzzed with the usual daily commotion of people going about their routines. The sun was high, casting long shadows, when Geeta, the housemaid, walked out to find me. Her voice echoed through the courtyard as she called my name, “Rana! Where are you?”

When she finally spotted me, her heart nearly skipped a beat. There I was, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the yard, surrounded by a group of monkeys. They moved around me with an odd calmness, as though I was one of them. I was casually sharing food with them, offering small bites from the palm of my hand, and the monkeys, rather than snatching it away in their usual hasty manner, took it gently, almost respectfully.

“Rana, come inside!” Geeta’s voice trembled with a mix of fear and awe, though she didn’t dare step any closer. But I, lost in my world, barely heard her. I laughed, watching the monkeys with the joy of someone reunited with lifelong companions.

“Didi Friends!” I said with an innocent certainty, smiling up at her. “Rana’s friends.”

By the time my parents came rushing to the scene, they found me sitting calmly among the monkeys, completely at ease—right where I belonged. My father, though initially alarmed, stood frozen, observing the strange yet peaceful interaction. My mother, her face pale, whispered, “What is this child? How is he doing this?” Sensing the sudden attention, the monkeys slowly scattered, scaling the walls one

by one and leaving me alone in the courtyard—still waving goodbye, treating it like any ordinary playdate.

This wasn't a one-time occurrence. A few days later, my family found me on the roof, deep in conversation with a flock of parrots. I gestured with excitement, and they responded—chattering, bobbing their heads in sync, engaged in what could only be called a conversation.

My mother found me first, stopping in her tracks at the sight of her little boy surrounded by bright green birds. "Rana... what are you doing?" she asked softly, though her voice carried a note of reverence.

I looked up at her, my eyes wide with joy. "Maa, Friends! My Friends! Play Friends!"

She didn't know whether to laugh or be concerned, but all she could do was nod. "We'll see," she said, her voice trembling slightly, unsure of how to react to the sight before her.

These unusual interactions left everyone in the house confused. My family had never witnessed such a natural bond between a child and animals. Even the creatures recognized some unspoken connection we shared. To them, I was a mystery—a boy who played with monkeys one day and held long conversations with parrots the next.

But if my connection with animals puzzled them, my inability to pronounce my own name left them endlessly amused. Whenever someone would ask, "What's your name?" I would puff out my chest proudly, ready to answer, but instead of confidently saying, "Rana," I would announce, "Ana!"

Every time, without fail, this would send my family into fits of laughter. My mispronunciation became a source of constant entertainment. My stammering attempts at saying my name were met with warm, affectionate laughter, and even though I couldn't understand why they found it so funny, seeing their joy made me happy. I'd giggle along with them, delighted that my simple mistake could bring so much cheer.

"I'm 'Ana'!" I'd proclaim once more, giggling as my father chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. "One day you'll say it right, Rana," he'd say with a smile, ruffling my hair.

At a young age, I never referred to myself as "I." Whenever I spoke, I would always say "we," instinctively acknowledging that I was never truly alone. It might sound strange to some, but to me, it felt as natural as breathing.

"I'm not alone, Maa," I'd often tell my mother, my wide eyes filled with innocence. "We're always together."

She'd smile at me, though her expression held a trace of wonder. "Who is 'we,' beta?" she'd ask, though she never received an answer that made sense.

Despite my mischief and the odd occurrences, I was filled with pure love. From the earliest age, I had an overwhelming sense of compassion. If anyone around me was in pain, I felt it too. I was always quick to offer help, even when I didn't fully understand what was wrong. Kindness flowed through me, a natural part of who I was.

It was my mother who became my first teacher in life. She nurtured me with kindness, patience, and love. "Always be gentle," she'd say, her voice soothing as she ran her fingers through my hair. "There is strength in kindness."

I clung to her every word, absorbing her lessons about love, gentleness, and the importance of learning. She was the soft place I would run to when the world became too heavy.

But my father? He was different. He was the examiner, the one who ensured discipline was never lacking. His methods were firm, almost harsh at times. If I made a mistake—no matter how small—I'd feel the sting of a slap across my face. "You need to learn," he'd say, his voice steady but never cruel. In our house, discipline wasn't questioned—it was simply how things were done. His authority was absolute, and mistakes were swiftly corrected.

There were days when my mother scolded me lightly for my mischief, and in my childlike innocence, I'd run to my father for comfort. But I would often be met with two slaps instead of sympathy. "One for her correction, one for running," he'd say, shaking his head, reinforcing the lesson with a sharp sting.

The logic was simple: where my mother's correction was soft, my father's was firm. It wasn't cruelty; it was balance. They both loved me in their own ways, and together, they shaped the person I was becoming. My mother, with her gentle heart, and my father, with his steady hand—two forces pulling me in opposite directions, yet working in unison to mould me into someone who could face the world head on.

At the age of two, my mother who had been continuing her education at college, decided it was time for me to start socializing. She found a small play school run by an elderly Parsi woman who lived just a few blocks away. It was a quaint, homely place, with faded floral curtains and walls adorned

with simple pictures of animals and alphabets. The moment we stepped inside, a warmth enveloped us., giving the impression that the house itself welcomed children. I was the youngest in the group, surrounded by children much older than me, but I didn't care. The sense of discovery, the new faces, and the unfamiliar sounds fascinated me.

The woman who ran the play school, affectionately called "Auntie," had a motherly aura that instantly put everyone at ease. She was a heavy-set woman with a soft, round face, her gray-streaked hair tied back into a neat bun. Her eyes sparkled with affection, and her every gesture radiated care. Auntie treated me like I were one of her own, often bending down to scoop me into her lap, her sari rustling as she held me close. Her bond with my mother was even stronger, treating her not just as the mother of a child in her care but as though she were her own daughter.

"This little one will be something special," she'd often say, patting my cheek while my mother smiled, her face filled with pride. The woman didn't just keep me entertained while my mother attended her college lectures; she became my first real teacher. Though I was still so young, barely out of infancy, Auntie took it upon herself to teach me. English was her favorite subject, and she delighted in guiding me through the basics with patient hands. Each lesson was like a game, filled with laughter and warmth. I absorbed the letters and words without realizing I was learning—it was simply fun.

Every morning, my mother would drop me off with a soft kiss on my forehead, promising to return soon. "Be good, my Rana," she'd whisper before leaving. And every afternoon, she'd arrive to pick me up, greeted by Auntie's stories of my

progress, her voice full of affection as she described my small achievements.

One day, as my mother and I were leaving, Auntie caught her by the arm. “He’s a special child, you know,” she said, her tone more serious than usual. “There’s something about him. He’s different.”

My mother, though startled, smiled and nodded. “Yes, I feel it too,” she replied softly. They exchanged a look—an understanding, a recognition that they both saw something unique in me, something even I wouldn’t grasp for many years.

Though I didn’t fully understand it at the time, these early memories, those precious days of learning from Auntie, would stay with me forever. In her care, I felt nurtured and safe. And even as a child, I knew her presence was a blessing.

By the time I turned three and a half, the inevitable decision loomed—it was time for me to start formal school. But not just any school. My parents had their hearts set on the most prestigious Catholic institution in town. They believed it was the best foundation for my future, a place where I could grow both academically and personally. Yet they knew securing a spot for me would be no easy task. Admission to this school wasn’t just about the child—it was about the parents. The interviews for them were almost as rigorous as those for the students. The school wanted to know the background, the education, the involvement, and the ambitions of the family, as much as they did about the child’s readiness to learn.

But amid all the preparations, my mother had one serious concern—me. I had developed a stubborn habit. I only answered questions when it suited me. If I wasn't in the mood, no amount of coaxing, prodding, or cajoling could make me speak. I'd sit there, silent, staring at whoever was asking, with not a single word escaping my lips. Silence, as it turned out, was my new form of rebellion. And my mother, deeply worried, feared I would take this attitude into the interview and ruin any chance I had of securing admission. She observed me closely in the days leading up to the interview, trying to figure out how to ensure I wouldn't let my moodiness derail the entire process.

Then one day, she noticed a weakness—my love for Bengali sweets. It was undeniable. There was nothing I wouldn't do for one of those soft, sugary treats, the kind with coconut dusted on top or filled with chhena that melted in your mouth. A plan began to form in her mind.

The morning of the interview dawned. I could feel the tension in the air as my parents, who had already passed their part of the admission process, were now focused on me. My mother's eyes darted nervously toward me every few moments as we prepared to leave. Just as we were stepping out the door, she called me over.

"Rana, come here for a moment," she said, her voice gentle but firm. I approached her, my curiosity piqued.

From behind her back, she pulled out a familiar box. My eyes widened instantly, recognizing the distinctive silver tray that housed my favorite Bengali sweets. She opened it, revealing rows of perfectly arranged spongy ovals, each dusted

with coconut and gleaming in the morning light. My mouth watered as the sweet scent of chhena filled the air.

I reached out, eager to grab one, but my mother quickly snapped the box shut with a sharp click. “Not yet,” she said, her voice taking on a more serious tone. “You’ll get the entire box after the interview, but only if you answer every question. No moody silences, understood? Do well, and they’re all yours.”

I stared at her, my hand still hovering where the sweets had been, my heart sinking just a little. “Maa, just one?” I pleaded, looking up at her with wide, hopeful eyes.

She shook her head, tucking the box under her arm. “No, Rana. All of them, after the interview. Do we have a deal?”

I hesitated for only a moment before nodding. The promise of those sweets was too tempting to resist.

The wait in the school lobby felt endless. My parents sat beside me, their nerves barely hidden. My mother clutched the box of sweets in her lap, occasionally tapping it gently to remind me of our deal. Each time I glanced at her, she raised her eyebrows to say, “Remember.”

Finally, we were called into the interview room. It was bright and cheerful, filled with colorful banners and decorations. A kind-faced woman in the traditional white attire of the Catholic sisters greeted us warmly. She invited me to sit beside her while my parents took their seats on the other side of the room, their expressions tense.

The sister leaned in, her voice gentle. “What’s your name, child?”

For a split second, I felt that familiar urge to stay silent, to let the question hang in the air unanswered. But then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of my mother's subtle movement. She tapped the box of sweets just enough for me to notice. The thought of those sugary, coconut-dusted treats was enough to snap me back to reality.

"Rana," I finally uttered, my voice barely audible, carrying the weight of both uncertainty and newfound courage. The sound of my own name felt foreign, like it belonged to someone else, yet it resonated through the room, breaking the silence that had hung over the moment. My eyes darted to the sister seated beside me, her face softening as she offered a warm, encouraging smile. The twinkle in her eyes reassured me—my shaky response wasn't a failure, it was a beginning. A small chuckle escaped her lips, more an acknowledgment of my effort than of amusement. For a fleeting moment, the tension in my tiny chest lightened. I had done it—I had taken the first step.

I could feel the gaze of my parents from across the room, their anxiety undeniable despite the peaceful surroundings. My mother, sitting at the edge of her seat, held her breath as though each of my words was tethered to her own, while my father sat still, his hands clasped together, silently urging me forward.

Then came the next question. It was more complicated—something about colors or animals, but the words floated in and out of my ears, muffled by the suffocating pressure to perform. I blinked, my mind momentarily blank. The room, once bright with cheerful banners and playful decorations,

now felt like it was closing in, every second amplifying my hesitation.

I glanced toward my mother. She met my gaze instantly, her expression unwavering. She didn't need to speak. Her hand moved ever so subtly, tapping the box of Bengali sweets perched on her lap—the promise that had tethered me to this moment. The promise that had kept me from retreating into silence. I straightened up slightly, my fingers nervously clutching the edge of the wooden chair, and focused. I could see the sweets in my mind—the soft, sugar-coated chhena, the faint shimmer of coconut dust, the sweetness that awaited me.

Suddenly, the words returned. “Red,” I answered, though the question may have been about my favorite color, or what animal I liked most—at that moment, it didn't matter. The sister nodded approvingly, her kind face unchanged.

The questions kept coming, and with each one, my resolve wavered between the weight of the room and the temptation of the sweets. Every time I faltered, my mother's silent encouragement drew me back. Her tapping, like a secret code between us, whispered, “You can do this. They're yours.” And with that thought, I found my voice.

The sister's final question appeared harder than the rest. I felt my mind wandering, my focus slipping. The words blurred again, but my gaze found the sweets, and suddenly, I was there—back in the kitchen, watching as the delicate ovals were laid carefully on the silver tray. The smell of coconut and sugar wafted through the air, the taste almost on my tongue. I closed my eyes for a second, imagining the sweetness of the first bite. And then, with renewed determination, I answered. I didn't

even hear my own voice this time, but I felt the relief ripple through the room.

“Good job, young man,” the sister said, her tone light yet filled with quiet praise. My heart raced, and the silence that followed was no longer suffocating, but filled with the release of tension.

I had done it. The interview was over.

I turned to my parents. My father leaned back slightly, exhaling a deep breath he must have been holding for the entire session. His lips curved into a smile—rare, but unmistakably proud. My mother, on the other hand, was already beaming, her face aglow with pride and relief. I didn’t need to ask if I had done well—her expression told me everything.

But there was only one thing on my mind.

“Maa, can I have my sweets now?” My voice was no longer hesitant. It was filled with the confidence that comes from triumph, however small.

She laughed softly, her eyes glistening with pride. “You earned them,” she whispered, her voice tender as she handed me the box.

We stepped out into the sunlight, and the world felt different—brighter, more expansive, as though the weight of the interview had lifted, leaving only the sweet taste of victory. My mother found a quiet bench in the schoolyard, and we sat together as I eagerly pried open the lid of the box.

Inside, the sweets glistened, each one more inviting than the last. The first bite was perfection. The spongy, sugar-

soaked chhena melted in my mouth, the delicate coconut flakes dissolving on my tongue like snowflakes. Each morsel was a reward, not just for answering questions, but for facing my fears, for pushing through the silence that had so often held me captive.

I savored every bite, each one a celebration, as the warm afternoon sun kissed my skin. The world around me hummed with life—the distant chatter of children, the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze, the rhythmic tapping of my mother’s fingers on the box, a reminder of her unwavering support.

In that moment, it wasn’t just the sweets that made the world feel right. It was the sense that I had taken a step forward—into a world that felt bigger, more challenging, but also filled with rewards.

I looked up at my mother, her eyes still watching me with pride. “I did it, didn’t I, Maa?” I asked, my voice soft but filled with a newfound confidence.

She smiled, brushing a stray hair from my forehead. “Yes, you did,” she whispered, her voice full of love and pride. “And this is just the beginning.”

We sat there, under the golden afternoon light, as I finished the last of the sweets. And in that fleeting, perfect moment, everything in the world fell into place—sweet and calm, just like the Bengali sweets that had carried me through.

Chapter 5

Shadows of Destiny

The anticipation in our home had been building for weeks, ever since the news had arrived—I had passed the admissions process. That piece of paper, with my name etched on it, felt like a passport to a world beyond the safety of my home. I was about to embark on my first day of school, a milestone that filled our house with a strange mixture of pride and worry. My parents had meticulously prepared for this day. It was a grand event, each step taken with the solemnity of a ritual.

That morning, the air felt different. The usual quiet of the house was interrupted by a flurry of activity. My mother had woken up early, earlier than usual, bustling around the house with a nervous energy. I could hear the faint clatter of dishes in the kitchen as she prepared my tiffin, the sound of her bangles softly tinkling as she worked. My father, too, was more alert than usual, pacing the hallway trying to find something to do to steady his thoughts.

I lay in bed, the golden light of dawn filtering softly through the curtains, casting long, warm streaks across the

room. The morning carried a stillness so deep, it felt like even the world outside was holding its breath, waiting.

My school uniform, crisp and fresh, was laid out on the chair next to my bed, beckoning me into this new chapter of life. The sight of it—a perfectly ironed white half-sleeved shirt, royal blue shorts, a red tie with white stripes—made my heart race. It was real now. The shiny black shoes, freshly polished, gleamed in the soft light. I traced the laces with my finger, feeling the smooth leather, the smell of polish lingering in the air.

The excitement thrummed beneath my skin, but there was also a knot of nerves twisting in my stomach. It was the first time I would be stepping out of the house alone, away from the familiar safety of my parents' watchful eyes.

"Beta, wake up! It's time," my mother's voice gently cut through my thoughts as she entered the room. Her footsteps were soft, but her presence filled the space with warmth. I could see the glint of pride and apprehension in her eyes as she stood by the bed, watching me for a moment before brushing a strand of hair from my forehead.

I sat up slowly, still sleepy, rubbing my eyes as the reality of the day began to sink in. "I know you're excited, but we have to be careful today," she said, her tone a careful balance of encouragement and concern. She led me by the hand to the washroom, making sure I followed the routine. The smell of fresh soap lingered in the air as I took a bath, the water cool against my skin. My mother handed me a towel, gently ruffling my hair dry as she whispered softly, "Today is a big day, beta. You need to be ready."

After I was clean and refreshed, she helped me into my uniform, her hands moving with a tenderness that only mothers possess, adjusting the collar, smoothing out any wrinkles, ensuring that every detail was perfect. "Follow every instruction carefully," she reminded me, her fingers gently knotting my tie. "No running around aimlessly. No getting hurt, okay?"

I nodded, though the thought of sitting still all day felt impossible.

Just as I was about to put on my shoes, my father entered the room. His usual composed demeanor was replaced by an unspoken anxiety that only fathers seem to carry. His eyes scanned me from head to toe, ensuring everything was in place. "Your first day of school is important," he began, his voice firm yet soft, trying to mask the worry underneath. "But remember, it's just the first step. Take your time. Don't rush through everything."

He knelt in front of me, tying my laces with deliberate care, his rough hands moving gently over the polished leather. "Don't run around aimlessly," he added, his brow furrowing slightly as he finished the knot, the weight of fatherly concern hanging heavy in the air. "And don't lose your lunch," he added, a small smile breaking through the seriousness of his tone.

Then, came the moment I'd been waiting for. My mother knelt in front of me, gently cupping my face with both hands, making me look directly into her eyes. Her face, usually calm and composed, showed signs of worry. "You're so hyperactive, beta," she said with a slight chuckle, trying to mask the

concern with a smile. “It’s your first day—make it smooth for me, okay? Don’t bring any tension home.”

Her voice wavered just slightly, and I could see the fear in her eyes—the kind that rises when a mother sends her child into the world for the very first time. Her fingers lingered on my cheeks a moment longer than usual, holding on to the memory of my face before letting go. “I packed your tiffin myself,” she said softly. “Please eat it. Don’t give it away to someone else.” It was her way of making sure a piece of her love stayed with me, even when she couldn’t.

The time came to leave. Pandit Uncle, the rickshaw driver, had arrived—his gentle voice calling from outside, breaking the morning stillness. My new school bag hung awkwardly from my back, far too big for my small frame, bouncing slightly with every step. It was heavy with books, and somehow, each step made it feel even heavier.

The driver, Pandit, was a man in his thirties who owned a small fleet of rickshaws—three or four in total. He wasn’t close to our family, but his reputation in the neighbourhood as a reliable and responsible man had earned my parents’ trust. My father approached him, exchanging a brief nod, an understanding between them as he entrusted Pandit with my safe passage on this monumental day.

“Pandit, make sure you leave him inside the class. Don’t let him out of your sight,” my father said, his tone carrying an unusual gravity. His voice was firm, layered with concern and a sense of warning.

“Yes, Sir. I’ll take care of it. I’ll make sure he reaches safely,” Pandit replied, his words steady, but my father, knowing my mischief all too well, wasn’t satisfied.

“No, you don’t understand,” he added, lowering his voice and leaning in closer. “He’s a troublesome one. He’ll find ways to bring you trouble you didn’t even think possible. Keep your eyes on him.”

Pandit Uncle gave a small chuckle, his easy smile never fading. He had no idea yet what kind of energy I carried with me. “Don’t worry, Sir. He’ll be fine in my care.”

I watched the exchange, my eyes darting between them, feeling the weight of my father’s words even as my excitement buzzed inside me. The auto was already packed with older boys, their legs too long for the small space, their voices loud as they joked and talked over each other. They looked like they belonged to another world—a world built on confidence and experience. And there I was, sitting among them, a flicker of light in a field of blazing flames.

The rickshaw rattled over the uneven roads, jolting us with every bump, and my excitement mingled with a twinge of nervousness. My heart pounded with the thrill of being away from my parents’ protective gaze for the first time. Freedom pulsed through me, and I could barely contain my giddiness.

But when we arrived at the school gates, my excitement shifted into something deeper admiration.

The school compound stretched out before me like a vast kingdom. At its heart stood a towering neem tree, its wide branches casting a generous circle of shade, guarding the grounds with an ancient, watchful presence. Cement benches,

worn smooth by generations, were scattered like quiet islands across the sunlit yard. The school felt enormous—far bigger than anything I had imagined. My mouth fell open as I took it all in.

This wasn't just a school. It was a world.

Pandit Uncle gently took my hand, his large palm wrapped firmly around my small fingers, grounding me in the moment. I looked up at him, and he gave me a reassuring smile. "See that bench under the neem tree?" he said, pointing. "That's where I'll pick you up after school. You wait for me there, okay?"

I nodded, but my mind was already far away, lost in the sea of students swarming around me, their voices blending into a constant hum of life. I followed Pandit Uncle into the main building, feeling the cool shadow of the corridors wash over me. The hallway echoed with the shuffle of feet and the low buzz of conversations.

At last, we stopped in front of a door labeled "L.K.G. A." My first classroom. Pandit Uncle squeezed my hand one last time before handing me over to Sister Martha, a tall woman with stern features softened only slightly by the glint of warmth in her eyes. She glanced at me over her glasses, which had slipped down her nose, then gave a curt nod and directed me to the last empty seat, all the way at the back of the classroom.

The wooden bench was cold against my legs, and I could feel my heartbeat quicken as I looked around at the other kids, all of them already lost in whispered conversations and giggles.

I felt small and out of place, but there was no turning back now.

The morning assembly was a blur. We stood under the hot sun, hundreds of boys in neat uniforms, all lined up like soldiers. The rhythm of prayers and songs washed over me, blending into a strange hum of discipline and routine. I was used to freedom, to running wild, but here, everything was structured, organized. I followed along as best I could, but my mind wandered.

Back in the classroom, Sister Martha wasted no time. She began a round of introductions, her voice firm as she called out each name, her sharp gaze settling on every child. I slouched a little, hoping she wouldn't notice me at the back, but soon enough, her eyes landed on me.

"You there," she called, her voice slicing through the chatter like a blade. "What's your name?"

I froze, feeling the weight of every pair of eyes turning towards me. My palms were suddenly sweaty, my throat dry. For a moment, the urge to remain silent swelled in my chest.

"R-Rana," I stammered, my voice barely above a whisper. I could feel my face growing hot with embarrassment.

Sister Martha raised an eyebrow, her lips curving slightly with the effort to suppress a smile. "And how were you standing during the assembly?" she asked, her tone laced with amusement.

I blinked, confused, unsure of what she meant. The class waited in silence, curious. Then, she mimicked my earlier stance—chest out, head tilted back, looking up at the sky like

a soldier posing for a grand portrait. Laughter erupted from the entire room, loud and contagious.

My cheeks burned, but as I watched everyone laugh, I found myself smiling. It wasn't so bad. Embarrassing, yes, but somehow, I felt like I belonged. I laughed along with them, my earlier nervousness melting away.

The rest of the day unfolded in a blur of introductions and games. I stumbled through the lessons, my mind more focused on the sounds, the sights, the sheer newness of it all.

As the final school bell rang, a sudden wave of excitement and chaos surged through the corridors. I had just survived my first day at school, and in the rush to leave, I momentarily forgot Pandit Uncle's advice to wait by the neem tree. I was caught in the flow of children streaming towards the gate, their shouts and laughter echoing all around me. Before I knew it, I was outside the school grounds, swallowed up by a sea of students and vehicles.

The heat of the afternoon mixed with the dust from the crowd, and soon enough, panic started to set in. I had never seen so many people all at once. My little heart raced, and in the push and shove, someone bumped into me hard from behind. I stumbled forward, scraping my knee on the rough gravel. Tears welled up instantly, and I stood frozen, overwhelmed by the unfamiliar faces moving around me like waves in a storm.

My chest tightened as I frantically searched for something—anything—familiar. “Maa,” I whispered, hoping her name alone might bring her to me. But nothing changed. The crowd grew louder, the ground beneath me felt harder, and the

world suddenly expanded beyond what I could bear. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I was utterly lost.

I began walking through the crowd, trying to push my way past towering figures, searching desperately for the auto-rickshaw that was supposed to carry me back home. All I wanted in that moment was to find my mother's comforting arms, to feel her warmth and safety. Fear clung to me like a shadow as I moved through the maze of people.

Just as despair started to grip me, a hand grabbed my shoulder from behind. I froze, my heart pounding. A familiar voice called out, "Rana! Is that you?"

I turned to find myself face-to-face with Manvendra Uncle, my father's cousin. Relief washed over me like a wave, and I immediately clung to him, not wanting to be alone for another second.

"Manvendra Uncle! Please don't leave me!" I cried, my voice trembling with fear and relief.

He knelt down to my level with concern in his eyes. "What happened, Rana? Where's your auto-rickshaw?" he asked gently.

"I think they left me behind. I don't know where it is," I stammered, my voice barely audible through my tears.

His brow furrowed in worry, but he squeezed my hand reassuringly. "Don't worry, you're safe now. Come with us," he said, leading me towards the waiting auto-rickshaw where his elder brother, Mahendra Uncle, was already seated.

As we approached the vehicle, Mahendra Uncle stepped out, his face softening the moment he saw me. Without a

word, he scooped me into his arms, his strong embrace soothing my racing heart. He gently placed me in the rickshaw beside him, and a wave of security washed over me. The world—which just moments ago had felt so terrifying—suddenly felt safe again.

They took me to their home, a cozy, warm place filled with the scent of food cooking and the laughter of family. As soon as we arrived, I was greeted by Choti Mai-sa, my cousin grandmother, who scooped me up into her arms with a broad smile.

“Oh, my little Devendra! Welcome to Choti Mai-sa’s house!” she exclaimed, her voice filled with warmth and affection.

Manvendra Uncle quickly narrated the whole incident to her—how I had been lost in the crowd, wandering scared, and how they had found me just in time. Choti Mai-sa listened intently, her arms still wrapped protectively around me. She smiled at me, her eyes twinkling with love.

Afterward, we went inside, where I felt surrounded by nothing but kindness. The anxiety of the day melted away as I began playing with my uncles, their laughter filling the room. Choti Mai-sa was waiting for her husband, my cousin grandfather, to return from the college where he served as the principal. Even in their bustling home, there was a sense of calm—a safe haven after the exhausting experience at school.

Back at the school, panic had erupted. Pandit Uncle, responsible for picking me up, searched every corner of the school grounds, calling my name with growing desperation. His heart raced, and sweat dripped down his forehead as he

scoured the chaotic crowd of students and parents. Each time he scanned the sea of children, I was nowhere to be found. He checked the classrooms, the assembly ground, even the narrow alleyways by the school gate, but I was gone. The fear that something horrible had happened began to consume him—what if someone had taken me? The thought gnawed at him as he frantically continued his search.

Tensions rose when Pandit Uncle stormed into the office, his voice strained with panic. “How could you let a small child out of the gates like this? He’s just a boy!” he shouted at the staff, but they were just as bewildered, unsure of how to answer. The minutes ticked by, and the situation felt more dire. Eventually, he had no choice but to hand over his auto-rickshaw to one of his drivers and rush to my home, knowing he had to break the news to my parents.

As he approached my house, the weight of his failure pressed heavily on him. Geeta opened the door to his anxious face, immediately sensing something was wrong.

“Where is Rana?” Geeta asked with concern.

“Where are Sir and Ma’am?” he replied, his voice tight with fear.

“Upstairs,” she answered, her unease growing.

Without another word, Pandit Uncle rushed past her, up the stairs, every step feeling heavier than the last. As he entered the room where my parents were eagerly waiting for my return, he felt his heart sink.

“Sir, I’m so sorry,” he said, barely able to meet my father’s gaze.

“Sorry? What are you talking about?” My father’s voice sharpened, the tension in the room rising.

“I’ve lost Rana,” Pandit Uncle blurted out, his face ashen. “I couldn’t find him anywhere at school.”

“Lost?” my father’s voice cracked, rising in anger. “I told you—he’s not a child you can handle lightly! Where did he go?” His fear was unmistakable, his body tense as he stepped toward Pandit Uncle.

Pandit Uncle, guilt written all over his face, quickly explained how he had lost track of me at school. My mother, who had been listening silently let out a sob, her face crumpling as tears streamed down her cheeks. Geeta, alarmed by the unfolding situation, bolted from the house to gather her family members to aid in the search.

Without wasting another moment, my father grabbed Pandit Uncle by the arm, pulling him toward the door. “Come with me,” he ordered, his voice filled with urgency. They rushed out of the house, heading straight for the school, hoping against hope that I was still somewhere on the grounds.

At the school, my father retraced my steps, searching every corner, calling my name. His heart pounded as he imagined the worst—what if I had been taken? What if I was hurt? He checked the empty classrooms, the rooftop, even beneath the benches in the playground, but I was nowhere to be found.

As time passed and hope began to dwindle, my father made the decision to involve the police. With our family’s influence, the police acted swiftly, sending search teams throughout the town and even to neighboring areas. They

scoured bus stops, train stations, and busy market streets, leaving no stone unturned. Meanwhile, my father and Pandit Uncle, consumed with worry, continued searching the city on foot, racing against time to find me.

Back at home, my mother was inconsolable. She paced back and forth, her mind racing through every possible outcome, her heart aching with the fear of losing her child. Each time a knock came to the door, her hope would flicker for a moment, only to fade when it wasn't the news she longed for. She prayed, begging for my safe return.

Meanwhile, at my cousin grandfather's home, I was blissfully unaware of the chaos unraveling around me. I played happily with my cousin grandfather, my laughter filling the room. The sun streamed through the windows, casting a warm glow over everything, and for a moment, all was well in my world.

That peace was soon interrupted by a sharp knock at the door. Manvendra Uncle opened it to find my father standing there, his face pale with exhaustion, Pandit Uncle by his side. My father, barely able to speak, sat down on the sofa across from my grandfather, his hands shaking.

When my father bent down to touch my cousin grandfather's feet, I suddenly leaped out from behind, catching everyone by surprise. My father froze mid-bow, eyes wide with disbelief. For a moment, he stood there, the whirlwind of the day's panic and frustration reflected in his expression. His shoulders relaxed, but the storm of emotions swirling within him—anger, relief, confusion—was still visible. The countless worst-case scenarios he had imagined during

the desperate search now evaporated in front of him, yet the intensity of those emotions lingered.

For a second, the room felt suspended in time. My father stood still, taking in the sight of me—safe, oblivious to the chaos that had unfolded in the last few hours. His breath was shaky as he straightened up, running a hand over his face to compose himself. He couldn't decide whether to laugh, cry, or scold me, so instead, he simply said, "Bring me a glass of water."

He sank heavily onto the sofa and began to explain everything to my cousin's grandfather's—how Pandit Uncle had lost track of me at school and the frantic search that followed. His words poured out in a rush, each one carrying the weight of his panic and guilt. As he spoke, my cousin's grandfather's expression hardened with disapproval. He turned to Pandit Uncle, who stood quietly in the corner, head bowed, eyes fixed on the floor like a child awaiting punishment.

"Why didn't you pick him up from the classroom? What were you thinking, leaving a boy his age under a tree to wait?" My cousin's grandfather's voice was firm but not unkind.

Pandit Uncle, filled with guilt, remained silent. Though he was deeply sorry, a small part of him was relieved that I had been found safe and sound. Despite the reprimand, he knew things could have ended far worse.

Then my grandfather scolded his sons, Manvendra and Mahendra. "You should have told someone! You brought him here without thinking how worried everyone would be!"

The two brothers exchanged guilty glances but didn't speak. They were still children themselves, not yet capable of fully grasping the gravity of the situation. Once the tension had eased, we all decided to head home. My father was still tense, eager to get back to my mother, who had been crying uncontrollably the entire time.

As we approached our house, the sight of my mother standing on the rooftop, her face streaked with tears, broke my father's heart. She had been waiting for hours, her eyes scanning the street in desperate hope. Without a second thought, I sprinted toward her, calling out, "Maa!"

The sound of my voice snapped her out of her daze, and she whirled around to see me racing toward her. She dropped to her knees, tears streaming down her face as she reached for me. I threw myself into her arms, and she held me with a desperate grip, refusing to let go. Her face sank into my hair, her voice trembling with emotion.

"Oh, my little angel, where were you?" she whispered, her words choked by tears.

"Sorry, Maa... I'll never leave you again. I missed you so much," I said, my own tears now mixing with hers.

Her arms tightened around me, holding me with the kind of force that tried to pour all her love and relief into a single embrace. "Don't ever do that again," she said softly, rocking me gently. "We were heartbroken, imagining life without you."

For the first time, even in my young mind, I understood how deeply my parents loved me. It was a feeling beyond mere

affection I'd felt before. Their love was intense, almost all-consuming, and it wrapped around me like a protective shield.

Later that evening, my father, sensing that the day's events had left everyone emotionally drained, decided to lighten the mood. "Let's go for a picnic," he suggested, smiling softly. It was his way of trying to bring some joy back into the day and ease the tension that clung to the room.

The picnic became a symbol of relief and gratitude for the family, a chance to celebrate that everything had turned out fine. And while the incident was frightening, it led to lasting changes. The school implemented new safety measures and now children under 3rd grade were no longer allowed to leave without adult supervision, and there was tighter security at the gates.

As the days passed, I grew more comfortable in my own skin, gaining confidence with each passing year. When the results came in, I had topped my class—and again the following year—filling my parents with unmistakable pride. With those achievements, I advanced to 1st grade, continuing to thrive academically. Yet despite my success in the classroom, the daily autorickshaw rides to and from school were becoming increasingly difficult.

It started with harmless teasing. Older boys, already in their teens, began mocking me for my name. Their words were sharp, biting, but I never responded. My instinct was not to fight back.

I found no joy in retaliating. Instead, I kept my gaze fixed on the passing scenery outside the window, feeling more pity for them than for myself. Their bullying felt small, their words

powerless against the world I had created in my mind. But over time, the taunting grew darker—sharper, no longer just childish mischief but something far more deliberate.

At first, the bullying was just verbal—mean words and taunts I could ignore. But as time passed, it escalated. Soon, I wasn't just the target of cruel words but physical bullying too. They would shove me around, push me against the side of the rickshaw, and on particularly bad days, make me stand for the entire journey home. Their laughter echoed in my ears, but I kept quiet. I didn't know how to defend myself.

One evening, when I couldn't bear it any longer, I gathered the courage to tell my mother. Her face twisted with anger and worry when she learned of the bullying. Without hesitation, she informed my father, and his response was immediate.

That weekend, my father arranged a meeting with the boys responsible. The first visit was to Rahul's house. Rahul was a boy in the 6th grade with a stammer, someone who had his own struggles, and yet, he was part of the group that tormented me. We stood in front of his house, waiting for his parents to open the door. As soon as my father explained what had been happening, Rahul's father, visibly frustrated, stormed into the house.

"Rahul!" his father bellowed, his face flushed with anger. "I send you to school to study, and this is what you do?"

Rahul stood there, his head hanging low, unable to meet anyone's gaze. His mother, adding to the reprimand, shook her head in dismay. "I've had enough of this. Every day, there's a new complaint."

The poor boy stammered an apology, his words barely forming through his trembling lips. “So-sorry,” he managed to say, but the words did nothing to soften his father’s fury. His father’s frustration boiled over as he lashed out, berating Rahul in front of everyone. The shame on Rahul’s face was clear, and despite everything, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of empathy for him.

Rahul’s father turned to my father, his voice cracking with remorse. “Bhai-saab, I’m so sorry. I assure you, this will never happen again.”

Seeing his sincerity, my father responded calmly, “It’s alright. They’re children. We just want the behavior to stop.”

As we left Rahul’s house, my father’s stern expression lingered. Our next stop was Golu’s house—Rahul’s cousin and perhaps the more notorious of the two. Golu, studying in the 7th grade, was well known for his antics. His parents, when confronted, didn’t take the complaint lightly. Their immediate reaction was denial, but after my father calmly explained the situation, their attitude changed. Golu, however, wasn’t as remorseful as Rahul. Though his parents scolded him, there was something in his eyes that suggested he was far from done.

Despite the warnings and scoldings, the bullying didn’t stop altogether. Golu, now emboldened by his anger, started plotting ways to get back at me. His taunts became more subtle, more calculated. And though I noticed, I chose to remain silent. Deep inside, I knew that engaging with them wouldn’t make things better.

Still, when the bullying became unbearable, I would quietly inform my cousin uncle, Manvendra Uncle. As we were in the same school, he took it upon himself to look out for me, stepping in when things went too far. His presence gave me a sense of protection that I couldn't provide for myself.

The days that followed weren't without their challenges, but I began to find ways to rise above the cruelty. The teasing, the pushing, and the standing up in the rickshaw—all of it became background noise in the larger story of my life. I was learning that sometimes, it wasn't about fighting back. Sometimes, it was about staying true to yourself, even when the world tried to break you down.

These experiences, as painful as they were at that time, shaped me. They taught me about strength, about the power of silence, and about the importance of choosing your battles wisely. And while the bullies in my life continued to come and go, I remained steadfast, always observing, always learning, and always growing.

The summer vacation had finally arrived, and with it came the much-anticipated family trip to my grandparent's house. I was now in the 2nd standard, full of energy and excitement. Our yearly visit to celebrate Lord Vishnu's day was special, drawing nearly two thousand people for a grand event that involved singing, dancing, and a langar where food was shared generously with everyone.

As soon as we reached, I could sense the familiar warmth of home wrapping around me. The house hadn't changed much since my last visit, when I was four-years old. This was

now my third summer back here, and as I stepped out of the car, I was greeted by the beaming face of Mai-sa, my grandmother. She stood at the front gate, her arms wide open, waiting to embrace me.

“Oh, my little angel! You’re growing so fast now,” she exclaimed with pure joy, pulling me into her arms. Her touch was soft, and her affection poured out with every word.

I smiled up at her. “Yes, Mai-sa,” I said, and bowed to touch her feet, feeling the warmth of her blessings envelop me.

Mai-sa’s voice softened as she looked down at me. “Don’t you remember me? You’ve taken so long to visit us. Three whole years,” she said, her tone teasing but with a hint of sadness.

“Of course, I remember, Mai-sa! But I’ve been so busy,” I replied with a grin. “You know, I have to study hard now... I’m going to become a pilot!”

For a moment, she smiled proudly at me—but then something strange happened. Without thinking, words spilled out of my mouth, placed there by a force I didn’t know.

“Mai-sa, I’m going to die at the age of thirty-three, in a plane crash.”

Her face blanched. The joy and pride she’d just felt vanished in an instant. “What?” she cried, her voice filled with sudden panic. “Who told you that?”

I froze, startled by her reaction. Mai-sa never shouted at me. Confusion and fear tangled inside me as I realized I had

no idea why I had said such a thing. I tried to recall if anyone had ever told me that, but my mind drew a blank.

“Never speak like that again, Rana,” she said firmly, but her voice was laced with a deep, protective concern. She knelt down beside me, taking my hands in hers. “You’re here for something much bigger, my child. You have a purpose.”

“A purpose?” I asked, my curiosity piqued. “What purpose, Mai-sa?”

She took a deep breath, and then, slowly, began narrating the story of my birth. Her voice was soft, yet every word carried a weight I couldn’t fully grasp at that time. The Matrikas, the guardian snakes, the mystical circumstances—everything came rushing back as she spoke. Though I was still young, her words lit a fire of questions in my mind. If my birth was so extraordinary, why did I endure so much bullying? Why was it so hard to form real friendships? The answers hovered just beyond my understanding, always out of my reach.

Still deep in thought, I excused myself and walked to my room. The moment I stepped inside, a wave of nostalgia swept over me. The space had changed since I’d last seen it, yet the memories returned with startling clarity. It felt like the Matrikas still lingered in the air, their presence woven into the walls, unchanged by time.

Their energy still lingered—woven into the walls, the floor, the very essence of the space. My mother’s gentle humming during those long nights, Mithila Bua’s protective gaze, the endless love and care that cradled me in my early years—every bit of it felt imprinted here.

I sat on the bed, running my hand over the quilt, feeling the weight of everything Mai-sa had just shared. For the first time, I began to sense that there was something more to my life, something larger than I had yet to comprehend.

Preparations were in full swing, with the energy of a grand wedding, each person buzzing with purpose. The house felt alive, bustling with the anticipation of the next day's grand event. Aunt Savitri's sons were entrusted with an important task—the responsibility of collecting sacred items from the nearby shrine. It was an honour, one laden with the reverence of tradition. And yet, something stirred within me that day, an intense pull that I couldn't understand, let alone articulate. All I knew was that I needed to go with them.

“I want to go, Mother! I want to go!” I shouted, my voice cracking under the weight of my urgency. My desperation echoed through the house, pressing into every corner like a rising storm. This wasn't a child's tantrum—it came from a place deep inside me, a force that refused to be silenced.

“No, it's too hot outside!” my mother's stern voice rang out, trying to reason with me. “You'll fall ill in this heat. It's not safe for you to go.”

But I couldn't stop. “Please, Mother, let me go!” My voice grew louder, more strained, and tears began streaming down my face, each one falling harder than the last. The intensity of my cries startled everyone in the house, pulling them toward the room to understand what had caused such a scene.

From another room, Aunt Savitri's concerned voice echoed, “What's wrong with him, Devika? Why is he crying like that?”

“I don’t know, Didi,” my mother replied, sounding exasperated as she threw her hands up in frustration. “He insists on going to the shrine with your sons, and he won’t listen to reason.”

As my sobs grew louder, two sharp slaps stung my cheeks—but instead of silencing me, they only fueled the fire burning inside. My cries erupted into frantic wails, driven by something I couldn’t explain. “I want to go! Please, Mother, let me go!” The desperation surged through me, rising higher with every breath.

By now, the whole household had gathered, all looking on, baffled by my behavior, whispering among themselves, trying to make sense of what had gotten into me. In the midst of the commotion, I suddenly heard the familiar sound of approaching footsteps. They were slow, measured—steps that commanded attention.

“It was Mai-sa”

The energy in the room shifted immediately. There was something about her presence that silenced even the loudest storm. She was the revered elder, the matriarch, whose wisdom was sought by all. As she entered the room, her face remained calm, her eyes soft yet perceptive. “Devika, what is happening?” she asked, her voice steady, but with an undertone of concern. “Why is he crying so much?”

My mother, clearly at her wit’s end, stood up and made to strike me again in frustration, but Mai-sa’s raised hand stopped her in her tracks.

“Why are you hitting him?” Mai-sa’s voice was gentle, but her words carried the unmistakable weight of authority. She

moved closer to me, her gaze falling upon my tear-streaked face. “What does he want?”

“Mai-sa, he wants to go to the shrine with Didi Savitri’s sons,” my mother said, her voice still trembling from the chaos of the past hour. “But the heat is unbearable, and I’m afraid he’ll fall sick. He refuses to listen.”

For a moment, silence filled the room. The air grew heavy with anticipation, as everyone held their breath, waiting for Mai-sa’s decision. She looked at me intently, her wise eyes narrowing slightly, reading something deeper than what was visible—beyond the tantrum, beyond the tears—straight into the heart of what was truly unfolding.

Finally, she spoke. “Don’t stop him.”

Her words were calm but resolute, leaving no room for argument. “Let him go,” she continued, locking eyes with my mother. “The divine powers have a plan for him today. We must never stand in the way of their will.”

The tension in the room eased, and my sobs gradually faded. In that moment, I felt a silent understanding pass between Mai-sa and me—an unspoken bond that told me she alone grasped the invisible thread pulling me toward the shrine that day.

My mother, still uncertain, chose not to question Mai-sa’s intuition. “Alright,” she whispered, gently brushing a tear from my cheek. “You can go.”

The moment permission was granted, the storm inside me settled. My tears stopped instantly, the shift so sudden it felt like a switch had flipped. The force that had pulled me so

powerfully now guided my steps toward my cousins, who were finishing their preparations to leave for the shrine. I could feel their puzzled glances trailing behind me as I climbed onto the tractor. My earlier outburst had left them shaken. They had never seen me like this before—and honestly, neither had I.

The journey to the shrine, a dusty 15-kilometre stretch, felt unusually long. The heat pressed down on us, thick and unrelenting, yet something in the atmosphere held more weight than just the sun. My cousins remained quiet, no doubt wondering what had compelled me to join them, but they said nothing, only casting the occasional concerned glance my way. I could feel the same thought lingering in each of their minds—this wasn't like me.

As we neared the shrine, the towering form of the deity came into view. The moment my feet touched the ground, something shifted deep within me—a stirring I couldn't explain. An invisible force gripped me, guiding every step as I leapt off the tractor and ran toward the main hall with a sense of urgency that burned from somewhere beyond understanding.

Inside, the grand statue of Lord Vishnu stood—magnificent and dreamlike—bathed in the dim glow of candlelight. The outside world dissolved, leaving only the deity's presence and a profound sense that I had been brought here for a reason.

Without hesitation, I approached the statue and knelt before it, my small hands reaching out to touch its feet. The moment my skin made contact with the cool marble, all the tension, all the desperation I had felt earlier, vanished. A deep

sense of peace washed over me, calming my soul in ways that words fail to capture. I sat there, in the stillness of that sacred space, not moving, not speaking, for what felt like hours. Time looked irrelevant in that moment—it was just me and the divine.

Outside, my cousins completed their task, gathering the sacred items with practiced efficiency. As they prepared to leave, they called for me, their voices gentle but persistent. But I wasn't the same boy who had desperately wanted to reach the shrine just hours earlier. The urgency that had driven me to tears was now replaced with a deep calm, a silence that enveloped me completely.

When I finally rejoined them and climbed back onto the tractor, I could feel their curiosity, but I had no words to offer. My thoughts were far from this world, lost in whatever had transpired within the shrine. My cousins didn't press for answers, sensing that something beyond their understanding had occurred.

The journey back home felt shorter—or maybe I had simply stopped noticing. When we arrived, the house buzzed with whispers about my strange behavior. As I stepped inside, I met a sea of concerned stares and hushed murmurs, but I had no words to offer. My voice wasn't lost to fear or hesitation—it was held back by a realization too deep to articulate, one I hadn't yet fully understood.

Soon, Mai-sa entered the room. She was the only one who understood that whatever had happened at the shrine had changed something in me. Her eyes met mine, and for a long

moment, she stood silently, studying me—recognizing a transformation taking place inside me.

“Rana, how are you?” she asked gently, her voice cutting through the fog that had settled over my mind.

But I couldn’t respond. I simply looked at her, my eyes filled with something deeper than words could express. I wasn’t sure what had changed, but I knew she saw it.

Mai-sa turned to my mother, who had been hovering anxiously at the door. “Leave him alone for now,” she instructed, her voice firm but kind. “He needs time.”

“Mai-sa, is he alright?” my mother asked, her voice tinged with worry.

“There’s nothing to fear,” Mai-sa reassured her. “He’s in deep thought. We cannot understand it yet, but we must not disturb him.”

Revati Bua, who had just arrived, peered into the room. “Has he eaten anything since he returned?” she asked, clearly concerned by my silent state.

“No,” my mother’s attendant replied softly.

“Let him be,” Mai-sa ordered gently. “When he’s ready, he’ll ask for food. Until then, leave him to rest.”

And so, they left me alone, trusting in Mai-sa’s wisdom. The world outside, with all its noise and activity, faded into insignificance. The echoes of laughter, the clatter of pots in the kitchen, the muffled sounds of celebration happening just beyond my door felt so distant, as though I had been removed from it, set apart in a space of my own.

Whatever had happened at the shrine still lingered in my mind, an inexplicable feeling that something profound had shifted within me. I couldn't yet explain it, but deep down, I knew I was changed.

The weight of the day—the ceremony, the constant attention, the watchful eyes—had drained my young body. I drifted into sleep without noticing the exact moment it arrived. The world, with all its noise and motion, faded into a soft, distant hum. The bed beneath me wrapped around like a cocoon, and everything outside slipped further away, until only silence remained.

And then I fell into a sleep deeper than any I had ever known.

In that slumber, something shifted. It wasn't an ordinary dream—or at least, it didn't feel like one. I was enveloped in a radiant light, not the harsh glare of day, but a warm, golden glow, like sunlight reflected on water. It wrapped around me—gentle, protective, and familiar in a way I couldn't quite recall.

I had felt this light before—back in the quiet safety of my mother's womb, where everything was pure and untouched. But this time, there was something different about it. The light didn't just exist around me; it was calling to me. It came from a single point, concentrated and powerful, pulsing with a rhythm that matched the beat of my own heart.

Above me, stars—thousands of them—began to shower down gently. They drifted through the air like soft snowflakes, their glow illuminating the darkness around me. I stood still, watching the scene unfold before my eyes. The stars fell in slow motion, time stretching into silence, the universe

holding its breath. Every sensation I had ever known faded, leaving only this moment—a serene stillness that settled deep within me, filling me with a peace that felt eternal.

I tried to speak, to think, but nothing came. My mind was blank, my lips still. There were no thoughts, no emotions—only a profound sense of presence. I had slipped beyond the boundaries of existence, into a place untouched by time or reality. I floated in the gentle light, the stars glowing softly around me, and for the first time, I felt truly connected to something vast and unknowable.

This wasn't a dream. It was too vivid, too real. My feet touched something unseen, yet I wasn't standing in any earthly way—I simply existed, suspended in an endless expanse of starlight and warmth. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't lost. I was completely at peace.

Suddenly, from that single point of light, a voice called out—not in words, but in feeling. Gentle yet commanding, it resonated deep within me. It spoke no language I recognized, yet I understood every part of its message: You are seen. You are known. You are chosen.

I didn't reply. I didn't need to. The light grew brighter for a moment, enveloping me completely, before it slowly faded, leaving behind only the quiet glow of the stars. And then, without warning, I felt myself falling—falling back into my body, into the bed, into the familiar weight of reality. The stars dissolved into darkness, and the warmth was replaced by the soft chill of the early morning air.

When I opened my eyes, the world was still. The morning light filtered through the curtains, and everything felt

different—quieter, softer. I lay there, my body still heavy with sleep, my mind trying to piece together what had just happened. It hadn't been a dream. I was certain of that. Something deeper, something more profound, had taken place.

When I woke, the room was empty. I glanced around, the faint morning light seeping through the curtains. The house buzzed with distant activity, but for the moment, I was alone. As I sat up and looked at the clock on the wall, I realised something strange—it was already 10:00 AM.

I'd never slept that long before. I was usually restless, waking every few hours from vivid dreams, but this time, It felt like I'd drifted into an abyss, completely untouched by the outside world. The house was alive with activity. The smell of breakfast, the murmur of guests, and the occasional burst of laughter carried through the walls. But everything felt distant, like I was listening through water.

Still half-asleep, I stumbled out of bed, an odd sensation washing over me. It wasn't tiredness, nor was it the grogginess that typically comes after a long sleep. No, this was different. I felt as though I was searching for something or someone, but I had no idea who or what.

My feet moved without my full awareness, carrying me through the house, past the bustling groups of people gathering for breakfast. Their chatter was a faint hum in the background, the clinking of dishes blending with the morning sounds. Faces turned toward me, curiosity evident in their eyes, but no one spoke.

I couldn't stop walking. Something greater than myself guided my feet, pulling me forward toward an unknown destination. My heartbeat steadily, but with every step, the intensity grew—an invisible force drawing me closer. I couldn't explain it, and I didn't want to resist.

Then, almost as if directed by an invisible hand, I saw him.

A frail old man stood near the doorway, his presence almost lost among the crowd. His thin frame was draped in faded white clothes—a vest worn with time, small holes fraying at the edges, and a white scarf hung loosely around his neck.

His skin, etched with the stories of his years, was weathered by time, by life, by hardship. His eyes, dark and sunken but filled with a quiet wisdom, caught mine, and in that instant, I knew I had found what I was searching for.

Without hesitation, my small feet carried me to him. I reached out and grasped his arm gently, my fingers curling around the soft fabric of his sleeve. He looked down, surprise flashing across his face, but he didn't hesitate. His gaze—aged and weary—locked onto mine, searching deeply, already understanding the words I had yet to speak.

"Kaka," I whispered, my voice trembling with something I couldn't identify—something ancient and powerful. "I saw a bright light... stars showering down on me."

The words poured out of me—waiting all along in the depths of my mind—now finally released.

The old man's face softened, but his eyes narrowed slightly—not with suspicion, but with quiet urgency. "Tell me clearly," he urged. His voice was low, almost reverent, edged

with an intensity that revealed the weight of the moment—something far greater than either of us could yet comprehend.

And so, I did. I told him everything. I recounted the dream with as much clarity as I could muster, though words were hardly enough to convey the vastness of what I had experienced. The light, the stars, the stillness that had enveloped me—it all spilled from my lips, unfiltered, raw. The old man listened intently, his eyes never leaving mine, his face an unreadable mask of quiet concentration.

When I finished, a silence settled between us. Time held still, the world around us shrinking into nothingness. His eyes widened, and something within him shifted—an uncontainable joy lit up his face, softening his weathered features into something almost childlike. Then, without warning, he began to dance.

It was not the kind of dance one does at a celebration, nor was it measured or rehearsed. It was wild, spontaneous, filled with an unbridled sense of joy. His frail body moved with a kind of raw energy that belied his age, his feet stomping the ground in a rhythm known only to him. His arms flailed with abandon, his head tilted back as he spun around, laughing—a deep, guttural sound that reverberated through the air.

"He came to bless you!" he cried out, his voice ringing out, echoing through the courtyard. "You are the blessed one!" His words carried an unmistakable weight, a truth that filled the space around us like a tangible force.

The entire household fell silent, their murmurs dying down as they watched the old man in astonishment. My heart raced, though I did not feel fear—only a profound sense of reverence. The words he spoke settled deep within me,

resonating in places I hadn't known existed. I didn't fully understand their meaning, but I knew, instinctively, that they were important. They carried a significance that I would come to understand only with time.

As his dance slowed, the old man knelt down, bringing his face close to mine. His eyes, filled with tears of joy, met mine once more. He placed a trembling hand on my head, his fingers cool against my skin. "You are the chosen one," he whispered, his voice low but certain. "Never forget this day, child. The light has seen you. It has marked you. Your path will not be ordinary."

I nodded, though words escaped me. The calm that settled over me was unshakable. For the first time, I felt whole.

The courtyard buzzed with whispered astonishment, but for me, the world had slowed to a standstill. I looked around, seeing everything through new eyes—the people, the walls, the sky. Everything was the same, yet everything had changed. My family stood nearby, their expressions a mix of confusion, wonder, and quiet reverence. They didn't fully grasp what had just taken place, but they understood enough to know that something extraordinary had unfolded in front of them.

From that day forward, I was different. I was quieter, more reflective. The wild energy that had once driven me seemed to be tempered by an inner calm, a stillness that had not been there before. The light from my dream, the stars that had rained down on me—they had filled me with something indescribable. And though I couldn't explain it to anyone, I carried it with me, quietly knowing that I would never walk the same path as others.

Chapter 6

The New Beginning

When I returned to my room, I walked straight to the bathroom, my mind clouded by confusion and wonder. Cold water crashed over me in sharp bursts, shocking my skin and jolting my senses.

It didn't soothe—it stirred something awake. The rhythm of the water striking tile was the only sound, cutting through the heaviness in my head. I stood there for a long time, hoping the chill would bring clarity. But the more I searched for answers, the farther they slipped from reach.

Once I was dressed, I slipped out of the house quietly, drawn by the familiar shade of the old banyan tree that stood like a silent sentinel in the garden. The cool breeze under its branches kissed my face, offering a moment of peace in the midst of everything. I sat there, my back pressed against the rough bark, gazing up at the sky through the gaps in the leaves, trying to gather my scattered thoughts.

How could I explain what had happened? The visions, the strange light, and the feeling that something greater was at work—it all felt like a dream. But I knew it wasn't. The banyan

tree, with its timeless presence, was the only thing that could hold the weight of my questions at the moment.

I hadn't been sitting long when a sudden gust of wind swept across the ground—and out of nowhere, seven monks stood before me. I blinked in disbelief. Had they appeared from thin air? Their robes fluttered in the breeze, their faces composed and calm. No one had seen them arrive. They looked like they had stepped from another realm, drawn here by something unseen.

Startled, I instinctively rose to my feet, folding my hands in respect, “Namaste, Swami.”

Without missing a beat, the monks raised their hands in unison, and their voices, deep and resonant, filled the air as they spoke in perfect harmony, “It’s time. You may rise above the dead and flourish among the seekers. Hold their hands and show them the path to heaven.”

I stood frozen, their words still ringing in my ears. My heart pounded as I struggled to grasp what they had just said. What did it mean—*rise above the dead, flourish among seekers*? I had no idea how to respond, and before I could form a single question, they were gone—vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. One moment they were there; the next, the space they occupied stood still and hollow. Yet the weight of their presence lingered, pressing against the air like an echo that refused to fade.

Was this a dream? A vision? I looked down at my hands, almost expecting some physical proof of their visit, but there was none. My thoughts raced, trying to make sense of the words they had left me with, but nothing seemed clear. I

remained seated under the tree, lost in thought, the breeze brushing softly against my face.

I had no idea how long I had been sitting there when I finally opened my eyes and realized I was no longer alone. My family had gathered around me, their faces marked by a blend of concern and curiosity. My mother, aunts, cousins—even Bua—stood in silence, their eyes fixed on me, waiting for me to speak.

"Rana, what happened?" Revati Bua's voice broke the silence first, her tone laced with worry. Her eyes searched mine, trying to find the answer before I could even speak.

"We called you so many times!" Aunt Savitri's voice carried a mixture of exasperation and relief. "You didn't even twitch!"

I blinked, still caught between the strange encounter and the reality in front of me. My lips parted, but the words refused to come. How could I explain what had just happened? How could I make them understand something I didn't fully understand myself? The monks, their message, the way they had vanished into thin air—it felt too surreal. I could feel their eyes on me, waiting, expecting answers, but I had none to give.

"I...I was just sitting here," I mumbled, my voice sounding distant even to myself. "I didn't hear anything."

Revati Bua's hand reached out and rested gently on my forehead, checking for a fever. "You've been acting strange since yesterday, beta. Are you feeling all right?"

I nodded slowly, but the truth was, I wasn't sure what I was feeling. My mind was still back with the monks, trying to decipher their cryptic message.

A flurry of conversation erupted among them, each voice tinged with confusion, their unease impossible to miss. My family whispered hurriedly, eyes darting from me to one another, struggling to make sense of what they didn't understand. The tension thickened, hanging in the air like the stillness before a storm. Just as their concern crested, the sound of approaching footsteps cut through the noise, slicing the room into silence.

It was Mai-sa again.

She appeared at the doorway, her presence commanding immediate respect, her posture regal and strong. But even through her calm exterior, I could see the worry etched into her face, deeper than usual.

This was her third time coming to check on me, and though her movements were as controlled as always, the small lines around her eyes betrayed the concern she was trying to mask. She had heard the unrest, felt the confusion that rippled through the house like an undercurrent.

"Oh, so he's finally talking?" she asked, her voice low but cutting through the tension like a knife.

At once, everyone stood, compelled by an unspoken command. There was no hesitation—Mai-sa was the authority, and when she entered, they obeyed. I, too, tried to rise out of respect, but my body refused.

My legs turned heavy, and the moment I pushed myself up, a strange force pulled me down. I slumped back, limbs trembling under the weight of an exhaustion I couldn't explain. Every trace of energy had vanished, leaving me weak and unsteady.

I glanced around at my family, their worried faces reflecting my own inner confusion. Their eyes darted between me and Mai-sa, hoping she had the answers they desperately sought. But even Mai-sa, with all her wisdom, didn't fully understand what had happened. She wasn't without her suspicions, but she kept them close to her chest, revealing only what was necessary.

"Let him rest," she said, her voice softening, but still firm with authority. "He's been through something. Something none of us can fully grasp just yet."

Her words, though meant to reassure, did little to ease the tension. My family exchanged glances, silently questioning what that "something" could be. But Mai-sa's presence was enough to keep them from pressing further. She, more than anyone, sensed the weight of what had transpired, even if she couldn't name it.

As the shadows of evening lengthened, the conversations around me dulled. One by one, we made our way back inside, the air thick with unanswered questions and unease. The house was quieter now, the earlier bustle replaced by a strange, tense silence. Even as we sat down for dinner, the usual chatter that accompanied meals was absent. Every bite I took was heavy, weighed down by the lingering mystery of the day.

That night, as I lay in bed, the events of the day replayed in my mind like a film I couldn't pause. The vision of the monks, the glowing light, the words they spoke—it all felt like fragments of a puzzle I wasn't yet equipped to solve. And still, beneath the confusion, a quiet calm settled over me. The unknown had wrapped itself around me—not threatening, but present—something I could sense deeply, even if I couldn't explain it.

In the days that followed, life moved more slowly, as if the world had granted me space to catch up with whatever had stirred within me. I noticed things I had never paid attention to before—the rustle of wind through leaves, the subtle silences between words, the emotions that lingered behind every glance. The world had been whispering all along; only now was I truly listening.

The memories of the Matrikas—the guardian snakes that had watched over my birth—grew clearer with each passing day. What was once blurred and dreamlike now surfaced with striking clarity. I felt them coiled around me, their presence unwavering, both protective and powerful. They had never left. Their energy had always been there, silently guarding me, woven into the very fabric of my life.

For so long, I had felt their presence but never truly understood it. Now, I recognized it for what it was—an unseen force that had been guiding and protecting me all along. The world no longer felt like a simple, linear place.

Instead, it was full of layers, connections, and energies that shaped reality in ways I was only just beginning to understand. And while I didn't have all the answers, I knew one thing for

certain—whatever had happened, it had changed me in ways I couldn't yet fully grasp.

As time moved on, I was now eight years old and in third grade. Winter had come, and we were planning a trip to visit Aunt Sumitra's house in South India, where my uncle was posted.

I was elated, not just because we were traveling, but because I would finally get to see my cousin, Kalindi. She was my anchor during those months of quiet introspection. We had grown close, often speaking on the phone, sharing our thoughts. Even though I was younger, she treated me with a kindness and understanding that felt beyond her years.

Kalindi was twelve, and she was the only person who didn't think my out worldly questions were strange. Sometimes, she didn't have the answers, but she always tried her best. She quenched my thirst for knowledge in a way no one else could. And now, after so long, I was going to see her in person.

The train journey lasted twelve hours, winding through hills and plains, the rhythmic clatter of wheels lulling us into a state of quiet anticipation. When we finally arrived at the vast military campus where my uncle was stationed, a towering blue archway loomed ahead.

Two fighter jets stood frozen mid-launch, guarding the entrance with an air of power and purpose. The scale and symbolism of the place left me in awe. As we drove deeper into the campus, the roar of engines overhead sparked a thrill within me. I gazed at the sky, watching two jets soar and spiral in perfect harmony—a breathtaking dance that defied gravity.

When we reached Aunt Sumitra's bungalow, there she was—Kalindi—standing in the front yard, waiting with two guavas freshly picked from her garden. The moment I saw her, I broke into a run, and we embraced. That hug felt like coming home.

Being near her stirred something unexplainable—a current of energy that surged through me. She filled a space within me that no one else ever touched. Her presence calmed the chaos, grounded my spirit, and with her, I felt complete.

Kalindi felt the same. She shared everything with me—her secrets, her dreams, her fears. Our bond went beyond what most would expect between cousins. In her love, I found echoes of the Matrikas—the guardian spirits who had once watched over me at birth. And in return, I became her protector. I would stand against anything to shield her, no matter the cost.

We spent our days together, playing and laughing under the wide branches of the mango tree in her garden. One afternoon, as we sat beneath its shade, Kalindi turned to me, her eyes wide with sincerity.

“Rana, you know I love you more than anything in this world,” she said, a big smile lighting up her face.

“Yes, Sis, I know,” I replied, gazing back at her with the same affection. “I love you too, and I’ll never let any harm come to you.”

She paused for a moment, her voice softening. “Rana, will you always be with me? Will you never leave me?”

I didn't hesitate. "Yes, Sis, I promise. I'll always be with you."

In that moment, it felt like nature itself had wrapped us in its loving embrace. The wind whispered through the leaves, carrying our words into the sky. We were two children, bound by love, under the watchful gaze of the universe.

Aunt Sumitra, though she adored Kalindi, often showered me with even more affection. I felt it in the way she took me along to visit her friends or to play in the nearby park. She treated me like her own son. And Kalindi never showed a hint of jealousy. She understood the depth of our bond and held it close to her heart, just as I did.

I spent many afternoons with my uncle as well, visiting the air stations where the fighter planes were repaired. Each visit filled me with excitement. The roar of the engines, the sleek bodies of the jets—they captivated my imagination.

I dreamed of becoming a pilot one day, and my uncle—who had no son of his own—took great delight in my enthusiasm. He shared everything he could with me, patiently teaching me about the planes that had become such a vital part of his world.

Kalindi, on the other hand, dreamed of becoming a doctor. Our paths, though different, brought us even closer. We supported each other, our dreams entwined with love and admiration.

Those days with Kalindi were among the happiest of my life. But as always, time moved on, and soon it was time to return home. The memories of that visit stayed with me, a

reminder of the deep bond we shared, and the love that connected us across time and distance.

Time moved forward, and soon I found myself in the fourth grade. We had moved into a new home—a government colony. The rows of identical white and yellow buildings stood firm, each building echoing the same old-style cement design. There was something comforting about the symmetry, though it felt a bit restricting.

Our home was on the first floor, facing the main road, and from the rooftop, the view was breathtaking. I remember standing there, gazing at the vast stretch of nature unfolding before me. Behind us, a hill rose gracefully, a silent guardian keeping watch. To the east, the sky opened wide, giving us the daily spectacle of sunrise and moonrise—a sight so pure and divine, it felt like stepping into a dream.

Below, the fields sprawled undisturbed, a canvas of peace and stillness. From afar, the gentle rumble of a train would occasionally roll in from the railway line, a distant echo of the world beyond our quiet sanctuary.

The flat had three living rooms, a functional kitchen, and a large hall that carried the rhythm of daily life. But it was the rooftop where my world truly opened up. That space became my sanctuary—a playground where imagination soared without limits. I made new friends in the sector, most of them older boys, since children my age were few and far between.

Despite the new friendships, something felt off. While the other boys immersed themselves in games, jokes, and idle chatter, a quiet disconnection grew within me. Their laughter echoed around the rooftop, yet I couldn't understand the joy

they drew from it. It felt like I had drifted into another reality—one where everything once familiar had turned distant and unfamiliar.

Their carefree conversations about cricket, school pranks, and movies began to feel empty to me. I found myself retreating into my thoughts, drawn more and more towards something deeper. The more time I spent with them, the more I felt the pull toward something greater, something spiritual.

At night, as the moon rose over the horizon and bathed our rooftop in soft silver light, I would sit in silence, watching the stars twinkle above me. In those quiet moments, a sense of peace settled over me. I was no longer interested in the games and jokes of my peers. Instead, I pondered the mysteries of life, God, and the universe. Why was I here? What was the purpose of existence? These were the questions that now occupied my mind.

I had stepped into a new phase of life, one where my focus turned inward. I was no longer just a boy standing on a rooftop—I had become a seeker, quietly searching for meaning in a world that felt both infinite and deeply personal. The trains, the fields, the distant buildings below no longer held my attention. They belonged to a different realm, far removed from the inner world I had begun to explore.

I've always struggled with friendship, never quite able to hold onto it for long. People came and went, like fleeting shadows in the blur of my life, leaving no lasting impressions. No deep connections, no one I could truly call a friend.

Each person drifted in and out, and I found myself constantly alone, navigating a world that was chaotic and

indifferent. I tried to reach out, to find someone who might stay, but it never worked. Friendships, like sand, slipped through fingers. And so, my journey continued—alone, amidst the noise and chaos, where I didn't belong.

With time, I developed a strange feeling, one I couldn't quite explain. It started subtly, like a quiet voice in the back of my mind, until it grew louder, undeniable. At first, it was just a fleeting sense—a chill up my spine, a moment of recognition when there should have been none. I would walk into a room, see a place, or meet a person, and suddenly feel that I had been there before. Not in the literal sense, but in a way that made me question reality.

Everything felt so familiar, though I knew it couldn't be. Most would call it *déjà vu*, but what I experienced ran deeper—something far more profound. It wasn't just a memory resurfacing; it was a moment being lived again, time folding inward, revealing hidden layers of reality that usually remain unseen.

This growing sense of recognition became my quiet companion. Each time it surfaced, it left me unsettled—caught between doubt and wonder. Was my mind weaving illusions, or was I brushing against something beyond the ordinary?

I couldn't define whether it was *déjà vu* or something else entirely, but with each experience, I felt myself slipping deeper into a realm where the edges of reality grew thin, and something far greater stirred beneath the surface.

And then, something even stranger began. It arrived without warning, without reason. It started with a quiet understanding of the creatures around me. Birds and

animals—especially monkeys—were drawn to me, sensing something others overlooked.

I would watch them from a distance, and soon, they watched back—not with idle curiosity, but with a kind of knowing. There was a silent exchange between us, an invisible thread of connection I couldn't explain—only feel.

I didn't think much of it until one day, while walking along a deserted road, I spotted a group of monkeys perched on the branches above. They moved restlessly, visibly agitated. I stood still, watching them, when something stirred inside me.

Without thinking, I let out a low squeak—an odd, instinctive sound. Instantly, the monkeys froze. Every single one turned to face me. Then, in a sudden burst of motion, they rushed toward where I stood. I had called, and they had answered.

In that moment, something inside me shifted. A part of me long buried—deep, ancient, and quietly waiting—stirred to life. I had always sensed I was different, but this was beyond anything I had imagined. It wasn't a fluke. I had done this before, unknowingly—calling to birds, drawing animals close—but this time, I felt it fully. A dormant instinct had awakened, alive in my blood, guiding me with a clarity I couldn't ignore.

I kept this newfound ability a secret. How could I explain it? Who would believe me if I said I could communicate with the animals, with the birds and creatures that roamed freely while humans remained trapped in their own little worlds? And so, I kept it hidden, even as my understanding deepened.

The more I practiced, the more I realized I wasn't just imitating sounds or calling out in a random way. I was speaking to them, connecting with them, in a way that words could never explain.

It became almost second nature. When the monkeys approached, I responded with strange sounds—squeaks, chirps, and tones that resonated with them. They came to my aid when I needed them, not just reacting to my voice but attuned to my emotions. And it wasn't only the monkeys. Gradually, I discovered the same connection with other animals—dogs, birds, even stray cows. They responded instinctively, drawn to something within me.

As this ability grew, so did my intuition. It was subtle at first—a gut feeling, a quiet knowing about things before they happened. But soon, it became undeniable. I would feel something, deep in my bones, and know that it was the truth.

I could sense danger before it arrived, feel a change in the wind before anyone else noticed. My intuitions sharpened with every passing day, and I started trusting them more than the logical reasoning everyone else relied on.

But with this growing power came a sense of alienation. I was different, and I knew it. No one else could see the world the way I did, could feel the things I felt. I couldn't share this with anyone—not because I didn't want to, but because I knew they wouldn't understand. How could they? They lived in a world governed by rules, by logic, by reason. But I had crossed over into a space where those things no longer applied.

The more I embraced this side of myself, the more the world around me began to feel foreign. People were still the

same, still coming and going from my life, but now, it didn't bother me as much. I had found something else, something that felt more real than any friendship or human connection I had ever known. The animals, the birds, even the wind—these were my companions now. They didn't judge, didn't leave, didn't betray. They simply understood.

There was something else as well. I wasn't just learning how to communicate with the creatures around me—I was becoming something else, something more. There were moments when I looked into the eyes of a bird perched on a branch or a monkey swinging through the trees, and I could see myself reflected there. Not as a man, but as a part of this vast, interconnected world. And in those moments, I felt alive in a way I never had before.

I was also scared. Scared of what this meant, scared of what I was becoming. My life had always been full of chaos, of uncertainty, but now there was something even more unpredictable brewing inside me. I didn't know where this journey was taking me, but I knew I had to follow it. Even if it meant leaving behind the world I had always known.

For six months, I kept these strange developments to myself. They were too heavy, too surreal to speak about to anyone. The only person I trusted with my life was my sister Kalindi, but even then, I hesitated. How could I tell her something so unbelievable? But the weight of it grew, the secrecy pressing down on me until I couldn't hold it in any longer.

Finally, one evening, I called her. My voice trembled as I began. "Sis, I need to tell you something."

The concern in her voice was immediate, sensing the heaviness behind my words. “What happened, Rana? Are you okay?”

I hesitated for a moment before the floodgates opened. “Sis, I’ve been having these strange feelings... I can see the future. I can talk to animals... I sense things. I’ve been hiding it from you for months, and I can’t keep it to myself anymore.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and I could hear her take a breath. Her reaction wasn’t what I feared—it was worse.

“What?” She practically shouted through the phone, disbelief coating her words. “What are you talking about, Rana? This isn’t normal... Are you okay?”

My heart raced. I had expected skepticism, but hearing it from her—my closest confidante—was harder than I anticipated. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s real. I can’t explain it... I see things before they happen. It’s like I can predict the future.”

There was another pause. And then, she asked in a calmer tone, “Are you sure? Are you sure this isn’t just a dream or something you saw in a movie?”

I felt my heart drop a little, but I knew she was trying to process what I was telling her. “I swear, Sis, this is real.”

She was silent for a moment, and I could almost hear her mind working through the puzzle I had laid before her. “Okay... let’s say this is real,” she finally said, her tone measured. “You can’t tell anyone, Rana. They won’t believe

you. They'll think you've lost your mind, and I don't want that."

Her words were firm, but I could hear the concern lacing through them. She was trying to protect me, even if she didn't fully understand. "I don't think you're crazy," she continued softly. "But you need to keep this to yourself. The world isn't ready for things like this. Just be careful, alright?"

The relief that flooded me at her understanding was profound. I had feared judgment, but instead, I found someone who would listen, who believed in me, even if just a little. "Thank you, Sis," I whispered, my voice shaky with gratitude. "I was so scared to tell you... but I couldn't hide it anymore."

Her response was gentle, filled with a kind of wisdom beyond her years. "Rana, whatever is happening to you, we'll figure it out. Just don't try to face it alone."

From that day forward, Kalindi became my anchor. She didn't have all the answers, but she listened. She helped me make sense of the chaos in my mind, offering comfort in a way only she could. Even at such a young age, her guidance was like a light in the dark, and I knew that as long as I had her, I wasn't truly alone.

Chapter 7

Snakes in the Shadows



As time passed, I began to feel the presence of something—something divine, guarding me, watching over me, but not always in a way that brought comfort. It was an energy, powerful yet mysterious, hovering around me like a shadow. At first, I thought it was nothing more than my imagination, but soon, I could no longer deny it.

Then came the dreams—vivid, unsettling visions that left me breathless. Snakes coiled around me, their dark bodies glistening under the moonlight, keeping silent vigil as I slept. They didn't strike or hiss, but their presence made my heart pound. On some nights, I'd bolt upright, gasping for air, drenched in sweat. My mind spun in fear, caught in the grip of an invisible threat that hovered just beyond my awareness. I could feel eyes on me—watching, guarding—yet I couldn't escape the sense that I was woven into a web of energy too vast to unravel.

Sleep became a distant memory. My nights grew longer, stretching into endless hours of lying awake, my mind running in circles. Time began to blur—days passed in what

felt like the blink of an eye, but the nights stretched on, making me feel as though I was stuck in some endless loop of fear and confusion. Either I would lose my sanity thinking about all of this, or—somehow, in some way—I would find myself.

I had no idea how to cope. No one else could understand, and I couldn't find the words to explain it to anyone, not even to my parents. Only my sister, Kalindi, could sense what I was going through. She was the one who stood by me during this strange and unsettling phase of my life, offering her quiet support, even when I didn't know how to ask for it.

It was my ninth birthday. That morning, despite everything that had been swirling around me, I felt happy. The clouds of fear lifted for a while, and I allowed myself to feel excited, like any other child would on their birthday.

It was a Sunday, a perfect day for celebration. My parents had planned everything carefully, and I woke up early, filled with anticipation for the day ahead. My mind raced with thoughts of the events that would unfold—the prayers, the gathering, the party in the evening. For once, the chaos in my mind was replaced with the simple joy of being a child again.

Suddenly, the phone rang, pulling me out of my daydreams. Without even looking, I knew who it was. Kalindi. My sister's voice came through the line, warm and familiar. "Happy Birthday, my lovely brother," she said, her voice soft but full of love. It was the same greeting she had given me every year, but it meant more this time. I held onto those words like an anchor in the storm that had become my life.

“Happy Birthday to you, Sis,” I replied with a smile. It was our little tradition—she would wish me, and I would wish her back, even though it wasn’t her birthday. It was a small ritual, but it brought comfort, a reminder that she was there for me, always.

Before I could say more, another voice chimed in—my aunt. “Happy Birthday, beta,” she said, her tone as loving as my own mother’s. I smiled, feeling a rush of warmth. “Thanks, Mumma,” I replied. She wasn’t my biological mother, but I had always called her Mumma, and my real mother I called Maa. It was a small difference, but it mattered to me, to the bonds we had formed over the years.

Then my uncle spoke. “Happy Birthday, my boy,” he said. I called him Papa, though he wasn’t my father. My real father, I called him Dad, had wished me earlier. But Papa had always been a second father to me, and his words held a weight that only family could carry. “Thanks, Papa,” I said, my heart full as I listened to the familiar voices of those I loved, each of them bringing me a little closer to the calm I so desperately needed.

“We’ll celebrate your birthday here too,” Kalindi said, her voice full of excitement. “But for today, enjoy it to the fullest.” Her words were like a balm to my weary soul. Despite everything I was going through, this day was mine, a day of celebration, and her first call made it all the more special.

The day began with a yagya, a sacred prayer ceremony, held in our home. The house had just been whitewashed in preparation for Diwali, and the fresh paint gleamed under the morning light. The walls, once dull and worn, now stood

bright and new, reflecting the hope and renewal the day promised. The servants had been up since early morning, decorating the house with flowers and lamps, turning it into a place of festivity.

The yagya drew many from the neighborhood—women draped in vibrant saris, their bangles clinking softly as they whispered their prayers. I watched them offer blessings, their faces kind and full of warmth, and for a brief moment, peace settled within me. The same divine energy that had once haunted my nights now stood before me in the light of day, transformed into something sacred. I bowed my head as the flames of the sacred fire danced, feeling the weight of their blessings wrap around me like a warm embrace.

Lunch passed quietly. The elders sat together, their voices rising and falling in gentle rhythms, while I played outside with the neighborhood children. New families had recently moved in, and for the first time in ages, I had found a few friends my age. We ran and laughed, immersed in our games, the weight of the world momentarily forgotten. The strange and terrifying experiences that haunted my nights faded into the background. For a while, joy took over—and I clung to it, letting it wash through me like sunlight breaking through a storm.

As evening approached, the house came alive with music and laughter. The birthday party was in full swing. Servants moved gracefully through the crowd, balancing trays of sweets and snacks, while guests continued to arrive, their faces lit with joy. The cake appeared, adorned with vibrant icing and glowing candles that bathed the room in a soft, warm light. I stood before it, surrounded by friends and family, a wave of

happiness rising in my chest. At that moment, everything felt just right.

The cake-cutting ceremony was filled with cheers and applause, and after that, we played games—simple ones, but fun enough to make the time pass in a blur. Then, as night fell, dinner was served, and the party began to wind down. One by one, the guests left, leaving behind only echoes of their laughter and warmth of their well wishes.

I returned to my room, the day's excitement still buzzing in my veins. My bed was covered with gifts, colorful boxes wrapped in ribbons, each one a token of love from the people who had gathered to celebrate my day. I should have been happy, and in many ways, I was.

As I stood there, surrounded by the remnants of the day, the familiar feeling of unease crept back in. The divine energy that had been watching me, the snakes in my dreams, the sense of something beyond my understanding—it was still there, lurking in the shadows of my mind.

I didn't know what it all meant. I didn't know where this journey was taking me. But for now, I was trying to hold onto the good moments, the moments where I felt like a normal child, even if only for a day. As I lay down to sleep that night, my mind drifted back to the voices of my family, their love like a shield against the unknown forces that surrounded me.

The soft moonlight filtering through the thin curtains, casting pale, silver shadows across the room, a strange stillness settled in. The quiet of the night pressed down on me, and for a fleeting moment, everything seemed peaceful. But just as my eyes began to flutter shut, the lights went out, plunging

the room into a suffocating darkness. My heart skipped a beat, and my breath caught in my throat.

The sudden void felt suffocating, and before I could move, before I could even register what was happening, I sensed it—a presence. It was behind me, lurking in the shadows, watching. The air grew cold, unnaturally so, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I wanted to turn around, to face whatever it was, but my body betrayed me. I was frozen in place, paralyzed by an invisible force, my limbs heavy and unresponsive.

And then, it came. The sensation was unlike anything I had ever felt—a sharp, pinching pain at the base of my spine, like the prick of a giant spider’s fangs. A numbing cold spread through my veins, inch by inch, as if my very life force was being siphoned away. I gasped, but no sound came out. Fear gripped me, raw and primal, as I lay there, helpless, every nerve in my body screaming for release, for the ability to move, to run, to scream. But I was trapped.

My eyes darted frantically around the room, searching the shadows for the source of this nightmare. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her. Emerging from the darkness like a specter, her form bathed in the faint, eerie glow of the moonlight. My heart lurched in my chest as I recognized her immediately. It was her—one of the Matrikas, the protectors from my childhood, the one who had appeared in my dreams for as long as I could remember.

Her presence was both terrifying and reassuring. She moved without sound, her black robes flowing like shadows themselves, her face illuminated in the silver glow, her

expression fierce and resolute. Her eyes, glowing with an ethereal intensity, locked onto the creature that hovered over me, the thing that had ensnared me in its web of numbness and fear.

Without uttering a single word, she sprang into action. With a swift motion, she hurled something—an object, a weapon, I couldn't quite see—at the creature. It recoiled with a hissing sound, like air being sucked out of a room. The air around me crackled with energy as the Matrika lunged toward the creature, every movement swift and deliberate, a warrior engaged in battle.

The room came alive with the chaos that followed. The creature, now fully visible in the dim light, was grotesque—a shadowy, spider-like thing, its body twisted and unnatural, its legs sharp and jagged like knives. It moved with a speed that defied reason, its limbs skittering across the floor as it tried to evade the Matrika's blows. But she was relentless, her movements fluid, precise, a force of nature. The battle between them unfolded in flashes of shadow and light, each clash sending ripples of energy through the room.

And there I was, caught in the center of it all—unable to move, unable to scream, my body a prison of fear and numbness. I could feel the power of the creature tugging at my consciousness, trying to pull me into darkness, while the Matrika fought to protect me. I was nothing more than a spectator in my own nightmare, watching as these two forces—one of light, one of darkness—fought over me.

My vision began to blur as the weight of the creature's power pressed down on me. I could feel myself slipping, my

mind growing foggy, the numbness creeping toward my heart. The room spun around me, and I knew, deep down, that if the Matrika didn't win this battle, I would be lost—swallowed by whatever dark force had come for me.

And then, in the midst of the chaos, she turned to me. Her eyes, glowing with an almost otherworldly light, softened for a moment. She reached out, her hand moving gracefully through the air, and with a single touch, she pressed her fingers against my forehead.

A jolt of warmth shot through me, cutting through the cold numbness that had gripped my body. I wanted to speak, to ask her what was happening, but before I could form a thought, everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, the familiar walls of my room were gone, replaced by a vast, open space that stretched infinitely in all directions. The soft, oppressive darkness that had held me in its grip moments before had lifted, and in its place was something else—something breathtaking.

I sat on the edge of a cliff, the earth beneath me firm yet strangely untethered, as though the moment hovered outside the bounds of time. Below, a lush green valley stretched into eternity, its rolling hills cloaked in vibrant shades of emerald and gold.

Twilight poured over the landscape, washing it in soft pinks and lavenders—the sky painted by the hand of the divine. The air carried a gentle warmth, laced with the subtle perfume of peach blossoms. Behind me, a single peach tree stood in quiet majesty, its branches laden with pale pink

blossoms. With each breeze, the blossoms released their petals into the air, drifting like whispers from a forgotten dream.

For a moment, I could do nothing but stare. The beauty of the scene was breathtaking—a sharp contrast to the fear and chaos I had just escaped. I had been plucked from a world of confusion and terror and placed in a perfect, ethereal realm, where time flowed differently and everything was touched by divine light.

And then, I felt her.

The Matrika sat beside me, her presence gentle yet powerful, like the stillness that comes before a storm. She didn't speak at first, but her mere presence calmed the storm that had been raging inside me. A sense of peace that radiated from her, a quiet strength that made me feel, for the first time in a long while, safe.

I turned to her, my confusion still heavy in my chest. "How did we get here?" I asked, my voice small against the vastness of the world around us. The question hung in the air, not as an accusation, but as a plea for understanding, for answers to the questions that had been haunting me.

She looked at me with eyes that shimmered in the fading light, carrying the weight of centuries—eyes that had witnessed the birth and death of stars. Her lips curved into a soft, knowing smile, a smile that hinted at truths far beyond my grasp. "When you grow up," she said, her voice gentle as the breeze that carried the scent of blossoms, "you'll understand."

Her words, though simple, carried a depth that unsettled me. I wanted to know more, to understand what was happening to me, to understand her. "But what is your name?"

I asked, my heart racing with the need for answers, for something concrete to hold onto in this world that felt like a dream.

She only smiled again—that same enigmatic smile—holding back a name that felt too sacred to be spoken. The silence that followed carried a strange reverence, like the pause between breaths. And in that stillness, I understood: no answer would come. Not yet.

Without warning, she raised her hand and gently touched my forehead. The touch was cool, like the first drop of rain on a hot day, and in that instant, everything shifted.

Suddenly, I was falling.

But it wasn't the terrifying, gut-wrenching fall I had always feared. I wasn't plummeting from the cliff—I was surrendering to something far deeper, far more infinite. The world around me dissolved into light, a blinding, pulsating brilliance that swallowed everything. The sensation wasn't physical. I was being drawn into the very core of the universe, sinking endlessly into a boundless ocean of light.

As I descended, the light grew more intense, almost too much to bear, yet somehow, it was comforting, like a warm embrace that held me steady as I fell. I was weightless, floating through layers of light and shadow, through realms that felt like they existed outside of time itself. The sound of the world—the wind, the birds, the distant hum of life—faded into a soft, ethereal silence. All that remained was the feeling of the fall, of being carried by the light.

And then, without warning, I landed.

But instead of hitting the hard, cold ground, I sank softly onto a bed of lotus flowers. Their petals cradled me gently, the soft, velvety texture against my skin feeling impossibly real. The scent of the lotuses filled the air, sweet and intoxicating, a fragrance from another world, another life. Around me, the light softened, and I found myself surrounded by endless reflections of myself—like mirrors placed in every direction, each one showing a version of me, but different somehow.

I stood surrounded by countless reflections—each one a version of myself, yet none exactly the same. They stared back with distinct expressions, some serene and composed, others clouded by confusion and unrest, caught in the same storm I had just endured.

Among them stood forms of me I had never known—radiating strength, certainty, and a quiet command, as though they had stepped into their power long before I had even glimpsed mine. It was a confrontation with possibility, with the vast range of who I had been, who I was, and who I might yet become.

I reached out to one of the reflections, my hand trembling as it passed through the shimmering image, warping it into ripples like water disturbed by a single touch. The sight of myself—multiplied, fragmented—laid me bare. It was a revelation of hidden selves, aspects I had never dared to confront, rising all at once, undeniable and unshielded.

But amidst the confusion, a strange clarity emerged. I wasn't just witnessing myself—I was peering into something beyond the surface, uncovering a depth that had always been there, buried and waiting to be seen.

The light around me began to intensify again, and the reflections blurred, melting into one another until they vanished altogether, leaving me alone in the ocean of lotus flowers. The weight of the Matrika's touch still lingering on my forehead.

I closed my eyes, feeling the soft petals beneath me, the cool air against my skin, and in that moment, I realized something profound: I was not alone. I had never been alone. The Matrika's had always been with me, guiding me, watching over me, even when I couldn't see them. And now, as I lay there, suspended between worlds, I understood—this journey was far from over. The answers I sought would come, but only when I was ready to receive them.

For now, all I could do was trust the process.

When I awoke, I was on the floor of my room, sprawled in disarray. Moonlight streamed through the window, casting a pale glow over the chaos around me. The bedcovers lay crumpled at my feet, the chair in the corner had toppled, and papers were scattered across the wooden floor, each one a silent witness to something unspoken.

The room carried the silence of the aftermath—unsettled, heavy. My limbs throbbed with fatigue, every muscle aching with the memory of a struggle I couldn't recall. There was no sign of what had happened, only the undeniable evidence that something had.

I lay there, too weak to move, my body heavy with fatigue, sinking deeper into the stillness of the night. I hovered on the edge of sleep, my mind drifting in and out of consciousness. The battle from earlier—the Matrika, the creature—lingered in

the back of my mind like a forgotten dream, but I knew it wasn't a dream. It was real. Every part of it was real. But how could I explain that to anyone? How could I make them believe that I hadn't caused this chaos, that something far greater than me had torn through my room, leaving me broken and confused?

The next morning, I was jolted awake by my mother's voice. Her words, sharp and angry, pierced through the haze of my exhaustion. She stood in the doorway, her arms crossed, staring down at me with fury in her eyes. "What have you done to this room?" she demanded, her tone filled with disbelief and irritation. She scanned the room, taking in the mess—the overturned furniture, the crumpled papers, the discarded sheets—and assumed, as anyone would, that I had been the one to cause it.

I couldn't explain what had really happened, couldn't find the words to make her understand that it wasn't my doing. So, I just lay there, silent, my body still too tired to move, while she scolded me for what she thought was my recklessness.

Her voice faded into the background as my mind drifted, trying to make sense of it all. I wasn't afraid of her anger. I wasn't afraid of anything anymore. I had seen too much, felt too much, to be shaken by her fury. I was on a different path, one that she couldn't see, one that no one else could see.

My world was changing in ways I couldn't fully explain, and while everyone around me tried to impose their version of reality on me, I knew I was living in a reality of my own—

one where the rules were different, where the lines between dreams and waking life blurred.

At school, things weren't much better. My teachers had grown increasingly frustrated with me, their patience wearing thin with each passing day. I had become known for giving away my lunch, sharing my pens, and offering my supplies to anyone who needed them, often leaving myself with nothing.

I didn't do it for attention. I never wanted attention. In fact, I craved invisibility. But I couldn't help it—whenever someone needed something, I couldn't say no. Something inside me compelled me to act, to give, even when it meant sacrificing my own comfort.

I would sit through exams without a pen, having given mine to a classmate who had forgotten theirs. The blank sheet of paper stared back at me while the clock marched on, each tick a reminder of the failure I had already accepted. My teachers never understood. To them, I was careless, inattentive—someone who didn't value his future. But beneath their assumptions, a silent war raged within me. Something deeper, unspoken, kept pushing me to give, to sacrifice—even when I had nothing left for myself.

My parents didn't understand me either. My mother's disapproving gaze clung to me—sharp, cold, unrelenting. She rarely spoke, but her silence was louder than any reprimand. One glance from her could strip away whatever fragments of peace I had left. Her eyes demanded explanations I didn't have, and the pressure in her stare crushed the breath from my chest. Her expectations didn't rest—they pressed, cornered, consumed.

The school called her and my father in for a meeting to discuss my “strange” behavior. I could feel their eyes on me the entire time—my teachers’ exasperated stares, my father’s quiet concern, and my mother’s unyielding, steely gaze.

“He’s always distracted,” my teacher said. “He doesn’t seem to care about his studies, and his behavior is becoming more... unusual.” They didn’t say it outright, but I could hear it in their voices—the suspicion, the confusion, the frustration. I had become the problem child, the enigma they couldn’t solve.

But I didn’t care. I was on a different path now, one that had nothing to do with exams, pencils, or following the rules. My mind was occupied with things far beyond what they could understand. I had glimpsed something greater, something terrifying and beautiful all at once. And even though I didn’t fully understand it yet, I knew I was being guided by forces beyond my control. How could I explain that to them? How could they possibly understand?

It wasn’t just my teachers or my family. Wherever I went, I became the center of attention—whether I wanted it or not. I had never sought the spotlight, and yet, somehow, I had become its unwilling victim.

It seemed like whenever something went wrong, people turned to me, their accusing eyes locking onto mine. If a chair was broken, if a window was left open, if someone’s book went missing, I was blamed. At first, it was subtle, just murmurs and whispers, but soon, it became a pattern.

Even in silence, with my hands folded and my head down, the blame found me. My existence alone became a magnet for

misfortune. I began to question everything—was I cursed? Was some unseen force drawing shadows toward me, measuring my endurance, punishing me for simply being? The whispers trailed behind me in every corridor, filling every pause with suspicion. Eventually, I became an outcast—not through action, but by default.

The torment didn't stop with people. Nature joined in the cruelty. Winds toppled objects as I passed. Branches snapped overhead the instant I stepped beneath them. Birds circled relentlessly above, eyes fixed, wings taut. Accusations came without evidence. Wherever I stood, chaos unfolded, and others stared as though I had summoned it. I didn't understand it—but whatever it was, it pushed relentlessly, grinding me down, watching to see when I would break.

But I refused to break. I refused to let their stares, their whispers, their accusations crush me. Somewhere deep inside, I knew that all of this—every hardship, every challenge—was part of something larger. My destiny was unfolding, and it was testing me, pushing me to the very edge to see how far I could go. And even though I didn't know where this path would lead, I knew I had to keep walking. No matter how heavy the burden, no matter how much the world turns against me, I couldn't give up.

Because, in the end, this was bigger than me. And I had a feeling that whatever lay ahead, it was something I couldn't run from—something I had to face, even if I had to face it alone.

Chapter 8

A Gift of Love and Art

Now, I was in seventh grade—a twelve-year-old boy trying to navigate the twists of my destiny. Fate had become a constant shadow, looming over me and pulling strings I couldn't yet comprehend. Each day was a test, a puzzle revealing new pieces but never enough to complete the picture. At home, things had changed. Our household had settled into new routines and conversations, but beneath the surface, tensions simmered—quiet, steady, and always present.

One of those tensions revolved around Aunt Damayanti. Her relentless attempts to have a child had cast a heavy shadow over the family. For years, she had prayed, visited temples, and tried every remedy under the sun. But fate was a cruel master.

Nature had withheld from her the one thing she longed for most. Her sorrow lingered in the air—dense, heavy—trailing her presence and dimming every space she entered. But beneath that grief lay something more unsettling. A shadow that had always disturbed me.

The sharpness of her cunning, the ease of her deceit, and the quiet resentment she wore without apology—none of it was hidden. It was part of her, worn openly, cutting through the silence long before she spoke.

My parents, ever compassionate, had grown more and more sympathetic to her plight over time. I often overheard hushed conversations between them, the worry in their voices betraying the burden they carried. They were family-oriented people, and family meant everything to them.

One evening, as I sat quietly in the hall doing my homework, I couldn't help but overhear the conversation from my parents room. My parents were sitting close to each other, their faces drawn with worry, as they discussed Aunt Damayanti's situation.

"Devika, I think we need to make a decision," my father said, his voice quiet but resolute. "We can't keep watching my brother's family suffer like this. It's been years, and nothing has worked."

My mother nodded slowly, her eyes downcast, deep in thought. "I know, but what can we do? It's not in our hands. We've prayed, we've hoped... what else is there?"

There was a long pause, and then my father spoke again, more hesitantly this time. "I've been thinking. If she can't conceive in two more years... we'll try for another child."

My mother's head snapped up, her eyes widening, watching my father.

“If it’s a girl, she’ll stay with us,” my father continued, undeterred by my mother’s shock. “But if it’s a boy... we’ll give him to Damayanti.”

The silence after his words pressed in from all sides, dense and unrelenting. Even the ticking of the wall clock grew louder, each second dragging across the room with agonizing weight. My heart slammed against my ribs, and something within me tipped—steady ground turning uncertain, leaving me unanchored in the moment.

My mother’s voice, when she finally spoke, barely rose above a whisper. “Give away our son?” The disbelief in her tone was undeniable, her sorrow poured into each word, the very thought of it too heavy to carry aloud.

“She deserves a chance to be a mother, Devika,” my father replied softly. “She’s been through enough. This is the only way we can help her.”

I couldn’t listen anymore. I quietly rose from where I was sitting and retreated to my room, my mind spinning with a mixture of anger and dread. The thought of having a sibling had always filled me with excitement, but now? Now it felt like a cruel twist of fate. My own brother, if he were born, would be given away—to Aunt Damayanti, no less. A woman whose treachery still haunted me, whose attempts to harm my mother and me had left scars far deeper than anyone realized.

As I lay in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling, I couldn’t shake the fear that gripped my heart. How could they even consider such a thing? How could they trust her, after everything she had done? I knew my parents had compassion

for her, but I couldn't understand it. Not after the poison, not after the lies.

The memories surged through me, sharp and uninvited. The crash of the milk glass, the lifeless lizard in the kitchen bowl, the way she had stood there, watching me with that polished smile hiding something vile. And now, they were considering giving her a child—my brother.

This wasn't about what she had done. It was about who she still was. Beneath the surface, nothing had shifted. The bitterness still poisoned her, the lies still clung to her skin, and the darkness within her still turned the air cold around her. I didn't need proof. I already knew the truth.

I sat up in bed, pulling my knees to my chest, feeling the weight of the world pressing down on me. I was only a child, but this problem felt enormous—bigger than me, bigger than anything I had faced. How could I protect a brother I didn't even have yet? How could I keep him from growing up under Aunt Damayanti's influence? The thought of him being shaped by her, molded by her cunning ways, terrified me to my very core.

I glanced at the window, where the night sky stretched endlessly, the stars twinkling faintly in the distance. I knew the Matrikas were out there, watching over me as they always had, shielding me from dangers I didn't even know existed. But could they protect a brother I had yet to meet? Could they keep him safe from Aunt Damayanti's grasp?

For now, the future was uncertain, and the fear of what lay ahead was overwhelming. But I knew one thing for sure—I wouldn't let Aunt Damayanti's darkness touch my brother.

Even if it meant standing up to my own parents, I would fight for him.

In the meantime, life at school carried on. The days passed with a mix of routine challenges and unseen victories. But in the back of my mind, the storm of my family's decision loomed, waiting to change everything.

It was around this time that something completely unexpected happened.

I had always been diligent with my studies, a steady performer in the classroom, but never someone who stood out in any spectacular way. Until that day.

I sat in class, lost in thought, my pen dancing across the corner of my notebook. Trees, faces, a bird in mid-flight took shape, while the teacher's voice drifted in the background. Suddenly, the classroom door burst open with a bang. Every head snapped toward it. A boy from the senior grade stood in the doorway, breath ragged, chest heaving—his urgency charged the room with silent tension.

"Excuse me, Sir. May I come in?" he asked politely, standing at the doorway. But before the teacher could nod in response, he stepped inside and added, "I'm looking for Rana. It's urgent."

"Rana! Rana!" he gasped, his voice slicing through the stillness of the classroom. His eyes darted from face to face until they landed on me. "Miss Susane is looking for you!"

I froze, startled, glancing around to see if anyone else had reacted. "What for?" I asked, my voice low, breath catching in my throat.

“There’s an art competition!” he exclaimed, still breathless from his run. “She wants you to represent our school!”

For a moment, time froze. An art competition? My heart began to race, excitement flooding through me. This was completely unexpected. I had never been chosen for anything like this before. Art had always been a quiet passion—something I enjoyed in solitude, something I did without thinking twice. And now, suddenly, here was a chance to step forward, to do something bigger than myself.

I quickly stuffed my books into my bag, adrenaline surging through me. Without a second thought, I asked the teacher for permission and bolted from the classroom, sprinting down the corridor just as the boy had moments earlier. My mind was a whirlwind of emotions—excitement, uncertainty, nerves. Could I really do this? I wasn’t even sure I was that good at art. What if this was a mistake?

I arrived at the art room breathless, my heart pounding in my chest. There, waiting with her arms crossed and an expression that was both stern and unreadable, was Miss Susane. The fluorescent lights cast a sharp glow over her short-cropped hair and her neat, no-nonsense attire. She wasn’t known for being particularly warm, but today, there was something different in her gaze—something I hadn’t seen before. Was it pride?

“Rana,” she began, her voice firm but measured, “there’s an art competition at the girls’ branch of the school. One of our senior students dropped out at the last minute, and we need a replacement. You’re the best option we have.”

My excitement flickered for a second at the word *replacement*. So, I wasn't the first choice, after all. I swallowed the feeling down, determined not to let it show. Still, my pulse raced at the opportunity. "I'd love to go, Miss!" I blurted out, the words tumbling out with a little too much eagerness.

Miss Susane's eyes narrowed slightly, studying me with measured intensity. "You understand," she said slowly, "this competition includes students up to the twelfth grade. You'll be one of the youngest participants, and the challenge will be real. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

The moment crackled with stillness, her eyes fixed on mine, waiting. I paused for a breath, the weight of it settling in. Then I nodded—this time with purpose. "Yes, Miss. I'll give it everything I've got," I said, my voice steady and sure.

Miss Susane studied me for a moment longer, her piercing gaze locking onto mine, trying to assess whether I truly understood what I was getting into. Then, to my surprise, the corner of her mouth twitched ever so slightly—a smile? "Good," she said curtly. "The competition is today. We're leaving in 20 minutes."

Her words hit me like a jolt of electricity. Today? I felt my stomach flip, my heart racing faster than I could process. I wasn't prepared, not mentally—not in the way I thought I'd need to be. But there was no time to panic. I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Miss Susane wasn't just another teacher. She commanded respect—not through warmth or leniency, but through an uncompromising standard she held everyone to. Her reputation for passion was unmatched, her love for art almost

fierce. She demanded excellence and had little patience for shortcuts or indifference. Yet, for reasons she never voiced, she had always paid close attention to me.

Maybe it was because I followed instructions without protest, stayed behind after class to clean brushes and rearrange stools, or maybe she recognized a spark I hadn't yet discovered in myself. Whatever it was, she was offering me an opportunity—and I had no intention of letting it slip away.

We pulled up to the towering gates of the girls' school, and a knot tightened in my stomach. The building stood tall and unyielding, its high walls and wide windows casting deep shadows across the courtyard.

The place breathed with a quiet authority—ancient, disciplined, aware. I wasn't just arriving at a school; I was stepping into a realm that had witnessed generations before me. This wasn't just another day. It was a test of courage, and I was walking straight into it.

As soon as I stepped out of the school van, I was hit by the buzzing presence of people—teachers, students, and organizers bustling around, preparing for the competition.

Elderly figures with Rotary Club badges gleamed under the sun, their blazers stiff with formality as they moved purposefully from group to group. Two middle-aged women stood by, looking important, while the principal of the girls' school, a tall woman with sharp eyes, oversaw the proceedings. Everything about this place screamed prestige. My heart raced as I realized the stakes were higher than I had imagined.

In the crowd, I noticed that I was the youngest competitor. The others, all older, stood in small clusters, already chatting

and sharing quiet laughs. I could feel their eyes on me, sizing me up, probably wondering what I was doing here.

The air buzzed with their curiosity. I knew what they were thinking: What's this little kid doing here? But I wasn't going to let that intimidate me. I wasn't here by accident. This was my chance, my moment to show that I could hold my own among them.

Soon, the Rotary Club members gathered us in a semicircle, their presence commanding as they briefed us on the competition. The theme was announced: "The Rising Pollution and Its Future Impact." My mind clicked into gear instantly. Pollution. The future.

These weren't just abstract ideas to me. They were the very things that had haunted my dreams for as long as I could remember. My visions of a world struggling under the weight of its own destruction suddenly flooded back to me, more vivid than ever. I had seen this future in my mind's eye before. Now, I had to paint it.

I was handed a big blank sheet of white paper, along with a set of paints, brushes, and pencils. The tools felt both familiar and foreign in my hands. I stared at the empty page, feeling the weight of the task before me. Around me, the other students had already begun. Their brushes moved quickly, confidently. I took a deep breath and let my thoughts settle.

It's just you and the paper now.

As I dipped my brush into the cool, vibrant colors, I felt the familiar rush of images flood my mind. They were scenes I had seen before, in dreams so vivid they felt more like memories of a future I had yet to live.

The world I saw in my dreams was both haunting and captivating—filled with beauty, but also devastation. It was a future not far from where we stood, and the weight of it pressed down on me as I prepared to bring it to life on the blank canvas before me.

I began with the sky. Not the cheerful blue of a sunlit afternoon, but a sky choked by its own air. The vibrant hues had drained away, replaced by a heavy, sickly gray, thick with pollution. Smog and haze coiled together, forming a dense shroud that refused to lift—an oppressive ceiling pressing down on the world below. My brush moved with purpose, dragging deeper shades of gray and black across the canvas, crafting a sky that no longer offered shelter, only suffocation. Each stroke built a world under siege, where the heavens loomed with threat instead of hope.

Next, I moved to the rivers—those lifelines of the earth that once flowed with a purity and grace, now transformed into sluggish veins of poison. I could see them in my mind's eye: once glistening surfaces now coated with an oily sheen, their waters thick and dark, moving slowly as if they had lost the will to flow freely. In my dreams,

I had watched as waste and debris floated aimlessly in the rivers, choking them until they were no longer sources of life but symbols of death. On the canvas, I let my brush mimic that decay. I painted the river as I had seen it in my visions—dark, polluted water cutting through the landscape, its banks lined with broken pipes and crumbling structures.

The cities came next—massive, towering structures that cast long, menacing shadows over everything below. In my dreams,

these cities had grown into sprawling metropolises, cold and mechanical, with steel and concrete replacing the earth beneath.

The buildings loomed like giants, their once shiny facades now dulled by layers of grime and soot. As I painted them, I focused on the stark contrast between the towering man-made structures and the dying land around them. Windows were dark, broken; roads were cracked, the concrete blending with the desolation of the landscape.

But this wasn't just a nightmare—I refused to let it stay one. Even in destruction, my dreams always carried fragments of hope, quiet but unyielding. I remembered the stubborn green patches where nature still clung to life, defying extinction with each fragile leaf.

I brought them into the painting—small trees reaching upward, blades of grass splitting through cracks in the pavement, flowers blooming defiantly in the most unexpected corners. They stood their ground. Warriors of the natural world, unwilling to surrender. Tiny in scale, overshadowed by steel and stone, yet their existence whispered resilience. They testified to life's refusal to vanish, even when the world had stopped listening.

And then came the people—battling just to breathe. The elderly, stripped of dignity, ignored by a world too busy to care. The young, their mouths bound by plastic sheets, lungs aching in silence. Playgrounds had vanished; in their place sprawled a relentless stretch of concrete. Childhood had no space left to run. Those in their prime moved through the streets behind masks, not for style or safety—but for survival.

This was no distant dystopia. This was the harsh truth of what tomorrow could become.

The painting became a message, a prophecy I didn't fully understand but felt compelled to share. It was a warning, a vision of what could happen if we didn't change, if we didn't take care of the world we lived in. The dark skies, the poisoned rivers, the suffocating cities—they were all things I knew were possible, things I had seen in my mind long before this day. But the patches of green, the fight for life—they were the hope, the possibility that if we acted now, the future didn't have to be this way.

When I stepped back and looked at the finished piece, my heart pounded in my chest. It was more than I had expected, more than I had imagined I could create. The world I had painted felt alive, breathing in its own suffocating way. And yet, within the destruction, there was still a glimmer of life, of hope. I could feel the truth of it pressing down on me—the future wasn't set in stone, but it was waiting for us to choose our path.

Then, out of nowhere, I felt a presence beside me. I glanced up and saw the judges, three of them, standing silently, observing my work. They didn't say a word, but I could feel their eyes tracing the details, lingering over the contrasts between destruction and hope. I held my breath, not daring to break the flow of my brush. My heart pounded in my chest, but I refused to let it distract me. This was my vision, and I had to finish it.

Finally, the bell rang, signaling the end of the competition. I stepped back, wiping the sweat from my brow, my hands

trembling from the intensity of the moment. My painting stared back at me—a vision of the future I had always carried in my heart. It didn't matter whether I won or lost; what mattered was that I had poured everything into that piece, and now it was real. The world I had envisioned was no longer confined to my dreams—it was here, on canvas, for everyone to see.

But the day wasn't over yet.

As we entered the large auditorium for the awards ceremony, a surge of anticipation ran through me. The hall stretched wide and high, packed from end to end with students. Voices overlapped in a steady murmur, a chorus of energy that filled the space. Every seat was taken by the girls from the host school, their animated conversations ricocheting off the walls, turning the room into a living current of excitement. Prashant Bhaiya and I found seats near the front—close enough to the stage for every detail to be clear, every movement to be part of the unfolding moment.

The ceremony began with a buzz of activity—announcements, prizes, the applause of hundreds of hands clapping in unison—but my attention wandered. I tried to take in the grandeur of it all, but I was distracted by something I couldn't quite name. My mind drifted, floating on the sounds of the crowd, and then suddenly, my eyes stopped. Everything around me was still.

That's when I saw her.

She wasn't the focus of the event—far from it. She wasn't in the spotlight or delivering a grand speech. She was simply there on stage, assisting the host, quietly passing out awards

to the winners of other competitions. Yet to me, in that moment, she became the center of everything. The rest of the world receded, until there was only her—and me.

My heart skipped a beat as my gaze locked onto her. She was about my age, maybe a little older, her long, dark hair tied neatly with white ribbons that swayed gently with her every movement. She wore a simple white frock, but under the lights of the stage, it glowed like it was made of pure starlight. She wasn't flashy or extravagant; in fact, there was something incredibly understated about her presence. But to my eleven-year-old self, she was everything.

I couldn't explain it, but something shifted the moment I saw her. Time slowed. The clamor of the auditorium receded, the cheering voices of the girls turned faint, and everything else fell away. Only she remained, illuminated by the glow of the stage lights.

I watched her glide across the platform, handing out awards with a grace so effortless it defied explanation. Each movement carried a quiet elegance, turning the ordinary into something unforgettable.

Her smile—that was the moment everything changed. It wasn't ordinary. It carried a quiet mystery, a glow that hinted at stories left untold. Soft and warm, it lit up her entire face, reaching her eyes and setting them alight with a quiet brilliance. My heart pounded harder, my pulse racing with each second I looked at her. I had never experienced anything so powerful. What was happening to me?

I blinked, but she was still there. Was this real? I wondered if anyone else in the room could see what I was seeing. Could

they feel the same pull, the same gravitational force that had taken hold of me? Surely, they must have noticed her, too? But no one was paying attention to her in the way I was. To them, she was just another girl on stage, another face in the crowd. But to me... to me, she was something else entirely.

Her skin was fair, glowing softly in the auditorium lights, like she had been crafted from moonlight itself. She moved with such grace, her delicate fingers holding the certificates, her hair falling in gentle waves around her face. There was something almost angelic about her—too still, too pure for the noisy, bustling world around her. Her eyes, deep and dark, held a quiet wisdom far beyond her years, and every time she smiled, the world brightened just a little more.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. My throat tightened, and my hands twisted nervously in my lap. I had never spoken to her, didn't even know her name—but that didn't stop the strange familiarity that stirred within me. The way she carried herself in that moment, completely unaware of the impact she had on me, only drew me in further.

"Bhaiya, who is that girl?" I whispered to Prashant bhaiya, my voice barely rising above a breath, afraid that saying it any louder might shatter whatever invisible thread held me in that moment.

Prashant bhaiya followed my gaze, then shrugged. "No idea. Why?"

I didn't answer him. I couldn't. How could I explain what was happening inside me? How could I describe the way my heart raced every time she smiled, or the way the world seemed

to dissolve around us? All I knew was that I was seeing her in a way no one else was.

Her every move drew me in—the delicate way she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, the soft blush rising to her cheeks when the principal spoke her name. She carried a quiet grace, untouched by the world's chaos. At that moment, everything else disappeared. Only she remained.

I leaned back in my chair, my eyes never leaving her as she moved across the stage. The world around me faded, the voices dimmed, and all that remained was her.

And in that moment, sitting in the middle of a packed auditorium, surrounded by hundreds of people, I realized something: my life had changed. I didn't know how, or why, but I knew it. Something had shifted. Something inside me had awakened, and it all started with that girl. The girl whose name I didn't even know, but whose smile had stopped time itself.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking me roughly. "Rana! Rana!" It was Prashant bhaiya, his voice urgent as he leaned down, his face close to mine. I blinked, still lost in the haze of her, unable to fully come back to reality. "They're calling you!" he shouted over the noise, and I turned to him, confused, still half-entranced by the girl on stage.

"Calling me?" I asked, my words slow, my mind still wrapped around the image of her standing in the spotlight.

"What happened to you?" Prashant bhaiya asked, his voice carrying both laughter and urgency. The auditorium echoed with cheers, girls shouting and applauding—but none of it registered clearly in my mind.

"You came first!" he shouted in my ear, snapping me out of my trance. "First place! In the art competition!"

First? I won? The words barely registered. For a moment, I couldn't remember where I was or what was happening. My thoughts swirled in confusion. The clapping, the rising voices—they weren't distant anymore. They were real. And they were meant for me. All eyes were on me. They were celebrating my name.

I had been so lost in her that I hadn't even realized what was happening.

Prashant bhaiya tapped me on the head, grinning as he said, "You donkey, go! They're waiting for you on stage!" He pushed me gently towards the aisle, and suddenly I was on my feet, stumbling toward the stage, still half in a dream. My legs felt wobbly, my heart racing, but not because I had won. No, it was because of her.

As I walked toward the stage, my eyes searched for her. And there she was, standing behind the person who was about to hand me the prize. She hadn't noticed me, not yet. But I couldn't look away. My feet moved automatically, carrying me closer, but my mind was still with her.

The host handed me the award, and the entire auditorium erupted in applause, but I didn't hear it. All I could hear was the sound of my own heartbeat, pounding louder and louder in my ears. And then, it happened.

She looked at me. Our eyes met for the first time, and she smiled—God, that smile. In that instant, everything shifted. The noise, the crowd, the world beyond us—none of it mattered. Her smile carried a softness, an innocence, yet it

struck with a force I couldn't explain. It wasn't just an expression. It was a current, a rush of warmth that surged through me, stealing the breath from my chest and leaving me weightless.

At that moment, I knew. I didn't understand it fully, but I knew—I was in love. I was twelve years old, sitting in an auditorium filled with people, but none of that mattered. She was there, standing in front of me, smiling, and I had fallen completely, helplessly in love with her.

Even now, as I recount this, I can see her with perfect clarity—standing right in front of me. The stage, the faces of those handing me the award, the noise from the crowd—they've all vanished from memory. Only she remains. Her white frock, her neatly tied ribbons, the way the light touched her skin, turning her into an angel.

Every detail of her is carved into my memory with a sharpness that time hasn't dulled. I can't tell you who the chief guest was, or what they said, or even how I managed to walk off that stage. All I see is her. In that moment, everything else blurred. The universe had narrowed its focus and placed only her at the center of my world. And her smile—that irresistible, luminous smile—showed me something I didn't know I was looking for. I would give anything just to see it again.

I don't even remember how I got off the stage or how I made it back to school. The celebration waiting for me, the pride of winning—none of it mattered. I had seen her, and nothing in the world could compare to that moment.

There were now two bonds in my life that kept me steady amid the chaos—two quiet forces that gave me strength. One

was my sister, Kalindi—my unwavering compass, my shelter, the one who understood me without needing explanations.

The other was something far more fragile, yet no less powerful: my love. She didn't know it yet. She didn't even know I existed. Still, somewhere deep within me, a quiet affection had begun to grow, rooting itself in that single moment when our eyes met and she smiled. From that instant, I began to build a life around her in my imagination—a life we hadn't lived, a story I hadn't told, but one I was already carrying within me.

Each day, my thoughts wandered further, no longer circling just around the mysteries inside me—my strange connection to nature, my awakening senses. Now, she was always there too. Her memory stayed close, constant and whispering, pulling me into a space I didn't fully understand. I didn't know her name, where she lived, or who she truly was.

All I had was that single exchange—her face turned slightly, that smile that illuminated something in me I hadn't known was there. That single moment had taken root and refused to let go. Her image stayed with me—quiet, vivid, and unforgettable—woven into my days and dreams, a presence I hadn't asked for but couldn't live without.

As the days passed, I couldn't get her out of my mind—the girl on the stage, with her gentle smile and the way she lit up beneath the lights. Thoughts of her followed me everywhere, like a shadow I couldn't outrun. In class, I'd find myself drifting off, imagining what she might be doing, what her laugh might sound like up close. I'd replay that moment in

the auditorium, over and over, wondering if she had noticed me at all.

The more I thought about it, the more the weight of those feelings began to press on my chest. I needed to share this with someone, and there was only one person who could understand what was stirring inside me—Kalindi, my Sis. She had always been my confidante, the one who saw me for who I was, even when I couldn't put it into words myself. She would know what to say.

One evening, as the sky outside darkened and the house quieted, I lay on my bed, phone in hand, staring at the ceiling. The thoughts of that girl swirled in my mind like a gentle storm, and before I knew it, I dialed Kalindi's number. She picked up after the second ring, her voice warm and familiar on the other end.

"Rana! Finally, I was starting to think you'd forgotten about your poor sister," she teased, her laughter soft and light.

I smiled. Her voice had that magic, the kind that could ease any tension. But tonight, there was something different in my tone, something she would undoubtedly pick up on.

"Sis..." I began, hesitating for just a moment as I gathered my thoughts, "I think... I think I love someone."

There was a pause, and then Kalindi's laughter returned—rich, warm, and full of affection. It carried through the phone with the same ease it always had, a sound that settled something inside me. Her laugh had a way of grounding me, wrapping me in the quiet comfort of knowing I belonged somewhere, with someone who understood me.

“Who?” she teased, but her tone held a knowing edge. “That girl on the stage?”

Her words hit me like a gentle shock. My heart skipped a beat, and I bolted upright. How did she know? I hadn’t even told her everything yet. It was uncanny, the way she always knew.

“How... how do you know?” I stammered, my voice betraying the surprise in my chest. I could almost see her smiling on the other end, her eyes twinkling with the kind of wisdom only sisters have.

“Oh, Rana,” she said softly, her tone dipping into that gentle affection she reserved just for me, “You think I don’t know what’s going on with you? You’ve mentioned that event so many times since we last talked, and the way you describe her... it’s impossible not to notice.”

Her words washed over me like a wave of warmth. I hadn’t even realized how much I’d been talking about that day—the art competition, the auditorium, the girl. But Kalindi had noticed. She always noticed. She had this ability to understand what was going on in my heart, often before I even did. It was comforting, knowing that she saw me so clearly.

“I swear, Sis, you know everything,” I said with a small laugh, the tension in my chest loosening just from the sound of her voice. I shifted on the bed, knees tucked to my chest, phone pressed close to my ear. She had this uncanny way of making everything manageable, turning my chaos into clarity without even trying.

“Oh, I don’t know everything,” she teased, voice dancing through the line, “but when it comes to you? I know enough.”

I heard her smile in those words. But behind the teasing was something deeper—an understanding born from years of whispered confessions, midnight tears, and wordless loyalty. Her presence, even through a phone call, reached across the silence and held me where no one else could.

“But, Sis...” I murmured, eyes fixed on the moonlight pouring through the window, stretching silver shadows across the floor, “she’s different. I don’t know why, but I can’t stop thinking about her. Nothing’s ever hit me this hard before.”

There was a pause on the other end. I could almost hear her thinking, weighing her words before offering the comfort I had come to rely on.

“Rana,” she said finally, her voice gentler now, steady and sure, “I understand. Truly, I do. But you’re still figuring things out. Sometimes, our minds paint a picture that doesn’t always match what’s in front of us. Give it time. Don’t lose yourself chasing what hasn’t even begun. Reality demands more from us than our imagination ever does.”

Her words weren’t harsh—they carried the strength of someone who had seen more of the world than I had. She wasn’t trying to burst my bubble; she was trying to shield me from the ache that often comes from chasing illusions. Kalindi had always been the voice that brought me clarity, the one who gently reminded me to stay grounded when my thoughts began to drift too far.

“I know,” I whispered, though part of me wasn’t ready to let go of the hope blooming inside. “But what if this time it’s not just in my head? What if she’s meant to cross paths with me? What if this is real?”

Kalindi sighed softly, and I could almost hear the smile in her voice again, though it was laced with the tenderness of an older sibling who had seen more of the world than I had.

“Maybe,” she said, her voice lighter now, “but you won’t know until you take it slow. Just because it feels big right now doesn’t mean it’s everything. Give yourself time to figure out what this really is, and if it’s meant to be, it’ll find its way.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see it. Her words settled over me, steadying my thoughts. She was right. Still, a small ember of hope burned quietly in my chest, refusing to go out. The idea that something rare, something meant to be, had entered my life was hard to ignore.

“I’ll try,” I whispered, sinking back into the bed. A strange mix of comfort and yearning pulsed through me. “But there was something about her... something I can’t explain. It wasn’t ordinary.”

Kalindi’s gentle laugh reached my ear, full of affection. “Rana, you carry a dreamer’s heart,” she said. “That’s your strength. But remember—life has its own rhythm. Let it show you what’s meant for you. Don’t chase it before it arrives.”

And just like that, her voice carved space through the storm in my mind. She had a way of softening the edges of everything, reminding me that no matter where the path twisted, she would be there—steady, reassuring, always just a call away.

“Thank you, Sis,” I said, the warmth in my voice unmistakable. “You always know what to say.”

“Always, my little diamond,” she whispered back. “Always.”

Kalindi never dismissed my feelings. Not once. It was one of the things I treasured most about her—she listened with her whole heart. Whether my dreams soared high or teetered on the edge of impossible, she welcomed every thought with quiet understanding. Her presence offered something rare: a space where I was truly heard. With her, even my most fleeting hopes felt meaningful.

That night, lying on my bed, phone pressed to my ear, I was reminded once again how lucky I was to have her.

“Tell me more,” she urged, her voice smooth and steady. “What is it about her, Rana? What makes this girl different?”

I hesitated, searching for words that could carry the weight of what I’d felt. “It’s not just that she’s beautiful, Sis,” I began, my voice low, sincere. “There was something in that moment... when I saw her, the world just... stilled. Everything faded. Her smile, her eyes, the way she moved—she didn’t blend in. She stood out, like she carried something extraordinary within her.”

A soft laugh slipped through the speaker—gentle, airy. “You’re such a dreamer, little brother,” Kalindi said, her voice wrapping around me with affection, not teasing. “And that’s exactly what makes you special. You notice what others overlook.”

I shifted slightly, uncertainty creeping in. “Do you think I’m being stupid?” I asked. “I mean... I don’t even know her. She probably forgot me the second I left. And here I am, turning her into something more in my mind.”

My voice faded, the emotions knotted inside me too complex to name. But Kalindi didn't rush to respond. She let the silence hold space for my words, as she always did.

Kalindi's voice softened, becoming that comforting, steady presence I had come to rely on. "No, it's not stupid, Rana," she said gently. "It's not stupid at all. You're allowed to feel what you feel. But," she paused, letting the word hang in the air for a moment, "you have to give it time. Don't rush it. These feelings are powerful, and they're real, but they also need space to grow. You can't force them."

I let out a quiet sigh, her words settling in my chest. "I don't know, Sis... It's just this feeling. Maybe she's meant to be someone important. That our paths aren't done crossing. Sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"It's not stupid," she replied, her tone calm but unwavering. "It means you're searching for something that matters. Something real. That kind of hope is rare, Rana. Just remember—life doesn't always move on our schedule. If she's meant to return, she will. But don't disappear into the waiting. Keep believing in what you feel... but stay grounded too."

Her words steadied me, a quiet force pulling me out of the storm I hadn't even realized I was trapped in. "You always know what to say," I whispered, a faint smile finding its way to my face. "How do you do that?"

She chuckled softly. "That's what big sisters are for," she said. "And don't forget—I've stood in the same place you're standing now. You're not alone, even when it feels that way."

We both laughed then, and for a while, the conversation shifted, like it always did. We talked about silly things—our inside jokes, childhood memories that never lost their charm. Kalindi was the kind of person who could make you feel light again, even when you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.

As the night deepened, our conversation drifted, as it often did, toward the topic of family. We talked about the small things that made up our everyday lives—the worries our parents had, the stories we heard from relatives, the things that made us both laugh and roll our eyes.

Talking to Kalindi always made everything feel better, lighter. She was my anchor, my rock, and I knew that nothing in this world could ever separate us. In her, I had found the truest form of family, and in me, she had found someone she could always protect, always guide.

Time passed, and with each passing day, I found myself sinking deeper into the feeling of love, or what I thought love was. It wasn't the kind of love you see in movies or read about in books—it was different, more intense, more consuming.

I was losing myself in her. Not by choice, but by some quiet force that kept pulling me deeper. My mind refused to let go—every thought circled back to her, every dream carried her shadow. I hadn't seen her since that moment on stage, but her absence only made her presence louder in my head. She had threaded herself into my consciousness, taking hold without permission. With each passing day, she spread through me—slowly, steadily—until I could no longer separate her from my own identity.

A part of me was focused on her in a way that bordered on madness. I found myself becoming restless, constantly wondering if I could somehow cross paths with her again, if I could just get a glimpse of her—anything, anything that would bring me closer to her. Every waking moment was filled with thoughts of her, and every night, I prayed for dreams where she might appear.

But I didn't tell anyone about this—not even my closest friends. I could have easily asked for help from my classmates who had connections in that college, but I didn't. Something held me back, like a secret that was mine alone to keep. I didn't even know if she was my age, younger, or older. It didn't matter. She had become this ethereal figure in my mind, untouchable, indescribable. Girls are already difficult to understand, but she—she was beyond words.

And soon, in my desperation to express these surging feelings, I discovered something new within myself. I started writing poetry. Not the usual kind of poetry that others write, but something different, something that came from a place deep within me, a place I hadn't even known existed until she awakened it.

It was February when I first noticed it. I was on the roof, the cold brushing against my skin as I worked through my homework, when a strange weight settled over me—sudden and unshakable, as though gravity had doubled. It wasn't tiredness or weakness. It was something else, deeper and more unfamiliar. I tried to dismiss it, blaming the chill, but minutes later, the sensation returned—stronger, undeniable.

My limbs gave way, and I sank onto the mattress beneath me. My notebook slipped from my hands, pages dancing away on the wind. Within moments, my eyes shut, and I was gone—dragged into a sleep I hadn't chosen, carried into a dream I couldn't resist.

And there she was.

For the first time, I saw her—clearly, unmistakably. She stood before me, no longer a distant figure in the background, but near enough to reach. Her presence radiated a quiet warmth, steady and undeniable. She wore a pale pink frock that shimmered under the dream's soft glow, and her long braid flowed down her back, brushing against the curve of her knees.

She smiled with a quiet grace that disarmed me completely. Her eyes—dark, deep, and impossibly expressive—held mine, speaking volumes in a silence that said more than any words could. Nothing moved, nothing made a sound. The entire world held its breath, and in that stillness, only she existed.

Time gave way.

I stood rooted, unable to speak, unable to blink. She didn't need to say anything. Her gaze reached places within me I hadn't dared to explore myself. Everything else faded. She had become the axis around which my whole world spun—without effort, without knowing.

Then, without warning, the dream tore apart. A sharp pull snapped me out of that stillness, and I jolted awake. I was back on the roof, my body sluggish from sleep. The cold air hit me, but the warmth of that vision still lingered in my chest.

My hand reached for the pen and paper lying beside me. I didn't think—I just wrote. Words spilled out in a quiet rush, pouring from somewhere deeper than thought, as if they had always been waiting for the right moment to emerge.

When I finished, I sat up, the chill in the air brushing against my skin again, waking me fully. I looked down at the paper, reading the words I had written, and it was as though they had been written by someone else, someone who understood what I was feeling far better than I did.

The poem read:

Wherever she walks, joy blossoms in her wake, Her eyes
whisper secrets, her lips never speak. Sunlight itself fades,
humbled by her glow; Flowers unfurl, butterflies circle slow.

Grace flows from her stance, quiet and profound, Her hair
cascades freely, caressing the ground. Eyes vast as oceans,
reflecting endless skies, Her brows gentle arches—where soft
moonlight lies.

In her presence, time falters, breathing still, A soothing
peace surrounds her, pure and tranquil. She is the silent wish
every heart conceals, The world spins gently, drawn by how
she feels.

I stared at the paper, my breath locked in my throat. Had these words truly come from me? Disbelief settled in. Each emotion, each vivid detail belonged to me, yet their origin stretched beyond my conscious mind, emerging from some hidden place within me—unexplored, untouched until now. I read the poem again, slowly, carefully, allowing each line to pull me back into the dream. Her eyes, holding mine with

quiet expectation; her silent presence, patiently awaiting my awakening to truths I wasn't prepared to comprehend.

A shiver ran down my spine. Was the girl in my dream the same one I had seen on stage? Or had my mind created this perfect image, this unattainable vision of someone who didn't even exist? I didn't know. I couldn't tell. But what I did know was that this feeling, this inescapable sense of longing, was real. And it was growing stronger every day.

The lines of the poem lingered in my mind, a whisper carried from the dream, drawing me deeper into a strange and beautiful unrest. I tried to dismiss it as coincidence, told myself it was just my imagination stirring—but the feeling wouldn't fade.

I returned to my routine, determined not to dwell on it. But then it happened again. And again. Every few days, a sudden, unshakable weight would settle over me, dragging me inward. Each time, a vivid dream followed—unreal yet unforgettable—and with it came an uncontrollable need to write. I couldn't stop it. I wasn't guiding the process anymore. Something else had taken over.

I couldn't make sense of what was happening. The dreams carried a vividness that left no room for doubt, and the poems that followed poured out with a fluency I didn't recognize as my own. By the fourth episode, a strange unease began to grow. The verses were undeniably beautiful, but their arrival unsettled me. They didn't feel born from thought or effort—they arrived fully formed, and I was simply the vessel, not the writer. And that frightened me.

One evening, as the weight of it all pressed down on me, I decided to call Kalindi. She had been busy with her studies lately, but I knew she would listen. She always did.

“Sis,” I began, my voice unsure, “I’m having this strange feeling again...”

There was a short silence on the other end before her laughter drifted through—soft, bright, untouched by worry. “So,” she teased, “have you finally spoken to this mystery girl?”

“No, Sis,” I answered, a little sheepish. “But... she came to me again. In a dream.”

I paused, unsure how to put the rest into words. “And then it happened again,” I continued, lowering my voice. I told her everything—the sudden drowsiness, the dream so vivid it clung to me even after waking, and the words that spilled out before I could make sense of them.

“At first, I thought my imagination was just running wild. But now... I don’t know. This wasn’t just daydreaming. I’ve had four of these dreams, and after each one, a poem follows—perfectly formed, like words already etched deep within me, waiting to be found. I don’t even know where it’s coming from.”

Kalindi listened patiently, the way she always did when something was weighing on me. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm and thoughtful. “So, you’ve discovered this new art in you, and now you’re worried?” she asked, her tone gentle but probing.

“Yes, Sis,” I admitted, the weight in my chest growing heavier. “I’m worried... and scared. I don’t understand what’s

happening. One moment I'm awake, and the next, I'm out cold—and when I wake up, there's a poem in front of me, written in my own hand, yet I don't remember writing a word."

She stayed silent for a few seconds. I could sense her thinking, carefully piecing things together. When she finally spoke, her voice carried the calm strength I'd always turned to. "Rana, you've known for a while now—your life doesn't follow the rules. Ordinary things don't stick around you. They keep their distance, knowing they don't belong in your story. So, whatever this is, maybe it's divine... or maybe it's a part of you that's only now revealing itself.

Her words struck something deep within me, and I fell silent. She was right, of course. How could I doubt myself when I had never experienced anything normal in my life? Nothing about me had ever fit into the ordinary mold.

"You need to understand something, Rana," she said, her voice lowering—not just in volume, but in weight, carrying something deeper. "I trust you more than I trust myself. I believe in you because I've witnessed moments around you that no logic can explain. You've heard the stories. You've lived the unspoken. Whatever is happening now isn't meant to frighten you. It's calling you to step into it—to own it.

I held the phone to my ear, each word sinking into a place within me that had long remained untouched. I stayed silent, but my silence spoke for me. She knew I was still there, listening—completely present in the space her voice had created.

“Instead of doubting yourself,” she said, her voice filled with warmth, “you need to start accepting what comes your way. Whatever this is—these dreams, these poems—it’s part of your journey. Rather than questioning it, you need to be ready to surrender to it. Let yourself move with the flow, trust in your destiny. It will guide you, just as it always has.”

Her words wrapped around me, both soothing and weighty with truth. She was right. I had been resisting something that had always belonged to me—something that had patiently waited to be accepted.

“We’re all here for you, Rana,” she added, her voice soothing but firm. “But you have to rise above your self-doubt. You have to remember that the stairs remain, but the journey continues. We are all your steps, but you’re the one who has to keep moving. You can’t stay stuck with us. You have to climb higher.”

I felt a lump in my throat as her words washed over me. Whether it was truly Kalindi speaking or someone else guiding her voice, I couldn’t say. But in that moment, I knew I was being reminded of something important—something I had been avoiding.

I had been swept away by the strange events happening around me, letting them carry me wherever they pleased, but now, it was time to take control. It was time to stand firm, to trust that I was on a path that had been laid out for me long before I even understood what it meant.

“Sis...” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

Her gentle laughter returned, filling me with a sense of peace. “You’ll be fine, Rana,” she said softly. “Just trust yourself.”

And in that moment, the fog of doubt began to clear, replaced by a quiet resolve. Whatever these dreams meant—whatever truth lay hidden in the poems—I would no longer resist them. I chose to welcome them, to follow wherever they led, and trust that they were part of something larger waiting to unfold.

This chapter of my life stood apart from everything that came before. In just a few months, I wrote fourteen poems—each one carrying more depth than the last. The verses poured out of me, drawn from a place I hadn’t yet discovered, shaped by emotions I hadn’t known were there.

The poems were not only born of love, though love had undoubtedly ignited this transformation. They touched on patriotism, addiction, resilience, and the quiet power of the human spirit. Each line emerged from a place buried so deep within me, I struggled to grasp its full origin. And yet, the words came—unfiltered, unapologetic—carrying a truth I never realized I held. There was no pretense in them, only a raw honesty that startled even me.

I remember sitting down to read one of the poems, written in that half-dream state, and being almost shocked by the depth of it. It wasn’t just the words—it was the feeling behind them, the truth that they carried. “Did I really write this?” I would often ask myself, unable to believe that this art was born from me.

Soon, word of this new "talent" began to spread in school. People who had known me as the quiet, studious boy were now seeing a new side of me—an artistic side. "Rana, the poet," they started calling me. A poet! Me! The title felt foreign, yet right at the same time. I started to gain recognition, not just from my friends, but from teachers, seniors, and even the school administration. The transition from being a focused student to becoming a poet was the opening of an unexpectedly new chapter in my life.

I didn't stop at poetry, though. Soon, I found myself drawn to debate competitions—something I had never considered before. My new-found confidence from the poetry bled into my speech, and before I knew it,

I was participating in debates, standing before large audiences, delivering arguments with passion and conviction. I wasn't just participating; I was winning. One by one, trophies and certificates started piling up, and with each victory, I felt myself growing—becoming more of who I was meant to be.

"Rana! Another win, huh?" one of my friends joked, slapping me on the back after a competition.

I smiled, but deep down I knew that something had shifted inside me. "It's not me," I wanted to say. "It's her." Because even though I hadn't seen her since that day on stage, I knew in my heart that she was the reason for all of this. My love for her—this mysterious, unspoken connection—was the force behind everything. She had opened a door inside me, and from that moment on, the world had started changing.

But poetry and debate weren't the only flames that lit up inside me. Dance made its quiet entrance, almost waiting for the right chapter to begin. What began with a few small performances quickly grew into something far more profound.

Classical dance, with its refined grace and expressive detail, reached into places within me that words never could. The music, the gestures, the rhythm—all of it pulled me into a space beyond thought. My body moved with purpose, every motion charged with emotion, and the stage became a place where I spoke without speaking. The intensity of it left even me breathless.

"Rana, how do you do that?" my classmates would ask, marveling at the way I could transform on stage. They were captivated by the expressions on my face, the way I could become someone else entirely. Sometimes, I would disguise myself as a girl, with the traditional attire and the graceful postures, and when I looked into the mirror, I could hardly recognize myself.

"Is that really me?" I would think, watching the way my movements flowed like water, my expressions delicate and poised.

"You were so beautiful on stage today," someone would say after a performance, their eyes wide with admiration.

"Thank you," I'd reply, feeling a strange sense of pride. I wasn't just performing—I was living it, breathing it, becoming it.

And yet, through it all, I knew that it wasn't just me. She was behind it. I hadn't seen her again since that day, but she

was always there, in the back of my mind, in the corner of my heart, pushing me forward, driving me to become more than I was. Her presence, even in absence, was powerful enough to reshape me, to awaken all these hidden talents I didn't know I had.

I could sense her in every poem I penned, in each argument I delivered during debates, and in the fluid motions of my dance. She had become the quiet force behind my evolution, the spark that pushed me to reach deeper within myself. Though I hadn't seen her again since that day on stage, her presence lingered—unseen but undeniable—carrying me forward, step by step, through this unfolding transformation.

One night, after another successful performance, I sat alone on the rooftop, the cool breeze ruffling my hair as I stared up at the stars. The excitement of the evening still hummed through my veins, but beneath it all, there was a quiet sense of gratitude.

"Thank you," I whispered to the night sky, knowing that somewhere, somehow, she could hear me. "Thank you for everything."

At that moment, I realized that this was only the beginning. There was still so much more to come, so much more of myself to discover. And though I didn't know what the future held, I knew that she would be a part of it. Because even without seeing her, even without knowing her name, she had become the muse behind everything I was becoming.

And so, I let myself surrender to this journey, trusting in the love that had sparked a fire within me, guiding me toward a destiny I had yet to fully understand.

Chapter 9

Miracle and Hell

Aunt Damayanti had been trying for a child for as long as I could remember, but her attempts had been met with nothing but sorrow. Yet my family had decided to go ahead with a plan that unsettled me deeply. If my mother gave birth to a girl, they would keep her. But if the baby was a boy, he would be given to Aunt Damayanti.

The same woman who had twice tried to poison my mother—and me—during her last pregnancy, now stood to receive the most sacred of blessings: a child. And my mother, boundless in her compassion, was ready to offer it to her. Forgiveness may have come easily to her, but I couldn't understand it. How could they even consider handing over my brother? The very idea struck me as a betrayal, a weight far too heavy for my young heart to bear.

I had always wanted a sibling, a brother to be precise, and I had made that known to my mother countless times. The idea of having a sister didn't sit right with me—not because I disliked the idea of a sister, but because I already had one, my beloved Kalindi. The bond we shared was too strong to divide.

I couldn't bear the thought of having to share my love between two sisters, and so, in my mind, the only solution was for my mother to have a baby boy.

But the real dilemma lay elsewhere: what would happen to my brother? How could they even think of giving him to Aunt Damayanti? She had always cast a shadow over our family, her coldness and bitterness lurking in the background. The idea that my brother would be raised by her, that she might shape him into someone like her, haunted me.

For days, I wrestled with these feelings, confused and torn between the joy of a sibling and the fear of losing him before I even had the chance to know him. I prayed for a solution, and then one came to me, wild and improbable as it was.

What if both my mother and Aunt Damayanti had baby boys? That way, everything would work out. My mother wouldn't have to give her baby away, and Aunt Damayanti would have a child of her own.

It was such a simple solution, but it felt like a miracle—a miracle I knew I had no power to control. And yet, I wished for it with all my heart. I prayed to the heavens, begging for forgiveness for Aunt Damayanti's past sins, hoping that the curse of childlessness would be lifted from her.

I believed in this miracle more than I had believed in anything before. My mind, once filled with childish dreams, now turned toward something much deeper, something greater than myself. I was old enough to understand the complexities of life, to desire the good, to see how things might align if only nature bent to my will. I prayed not only for my mother to have a baby boy but for Aunt Damayanti to

become pregnant too—and for both of them to give birth to sons.

Three months into my mother's pregnancy, something unexpected happened. The news swept through the household—Aunt Damayanti was pregnant. My heart pounded with excitement. It was real. Nature had answered in its own mysterious way, turning a silent wish into reality. The impossible had taken its first breath, and with it, my faith in miracles grew stronger. Hope filled every corner of me as I waited, convinced that something extraordinary had begun.

Nine months passed. My mother gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. The moment the news reached me, something inside lifted. The heaviness I had carried for so long vanished, replaced by a soaring joy I couldn't contain. I had a brother—my own.

But the miracle was still incomplete. Aunt Damayanti's pregnancy had taken a troubling turn, and now my prayers turned toward her. This time, I wasn't asking for myself. I pleaded for her safety. Let her be spared. Let this promise of hope reach its end without breaking apart. We had come too far.

Two and a half months later, Aunt Damayanti gave birth to a baby boy. The moment the news reached me, joy burst through my chest. I couldn't hold it in. It was divine—too perfect to explain in words.

My heart brimmed with a happiness that refused to stay contained. Every silent prayer, every quiet hope, had come alive. My brother had arrived—and so had her son. It was

complete—each thread of the dream woven together without flaw.

From the instant my brother arrived, I couldn't stop smiling. The world felt different—warmer, brighter, right. I decorated every lane of the neighborhood with flowers, ribbons, and garlands draped from one rooftop to another.

Celebration spilled into every corner, an offering to the moment that had changed everything. People looked at me with disbelief. "Who goes this far for a sibling's birth?" they whispered. But how could they possibly understand? This wasn't just joy. It was fulfilling. And it ran too deep for words to ever explain.

But soon, joy turned to worry. My brother fell ill. He wasn't able to make his way home from the hospital, and my heart ached as I watched him struggle. Maybe my celebration had been too much. Maybe others couldn't handle my happiness. Not everyone likes to see others happy. My mother, always cautious, told me to take down the decorations. "People can't see others happy," she said, her voice filled with concern. She believed that the evil eye had fallen on our joy, delaying my brother's arrival home.

At first, I resisted. How could I take down the decorations when my brother was about to come home? I had imagined this moment for so long—the moment when he would finally arrive, the two of us together, just as I had always dreamed. I had big plans, plans to celebrate his homecoming in a way that no one would forget.

Days slipped by, and his condition continued to decline. A full week had passed, and he remained in the hospital, his

fragile body tethered to wires and tubes, each breath a silent battle. The doctors had placed him on a ventilator. Watching him in that state stirred a fear I had never known—sharp, raw, and relentless. I knew then that I couldn't stay silent any longer. I had to act.

In the end, I had no choice. I listened to my mother and took down the decorations. The joy I had once felt was replaced by worry, by prayer. I prayed for another miracle—one that would bring my brother home, safe and sound. I limited the celebrations to our home, keeping my excitement small, hidden from the prying eyes of others.

And then, it happened. Another miracle. Two days after I took down the decorations, my brother's health improved. He was strong enough to come home, and the moment my mother and brother walked through the door, a weight lifted from my heart. They were home, and we were together, just as I had dreamed.

This time, Revati Bua had come to stay with us after my mother gave birth, offering the post-delivery care she needed. My uncle had recently been posted to our town, so Aunt Damayanti was nearby as well. Our house had turned into a hive of activity—visitors streaming in and out, celebrations echoing through the rooms, and well-wishers filling every corner with laughter and conversation. But amid all the joy, my attention remained fixed on my younger brother.

He was small and fragile in my arms, yet his smile carried the weight of a miracle. Holding him stirred something sacred in me. I loved him with a depth I hadn't known before—an instinctive, consuming love.

His arrival didn't change what Kalindi meant to me; our bond stood firm, untouched by time or distance. And still, in a quiet corner of my heart, the memory of the girl from the auditorium remained, untouched by the passing days.

Love, I was learning, didn't demand separation. It could live in many places at once—undivided, unthreatened. I had no name for her, no voice to match the memory. Just that single moment—her smile—imprinted deep within me. It hadn't faded. It hovered in silence, steady and enduring, waiting.

By now, I was in my ninth grade, stepping into the early years of teenage life. It was a strange, confusing time—there was so much happening all at once. With the joy of my younger brother and the constant hustle of the family, I found myself slipping in my studies. My focus was scattered, pulled in too many directions.

Kalindi had also entered college, and her studies demanded so much of her attention that our regular calls became less frequent. Though I missed her, I understood she had her own journey now. At home, my younger brother's laughter filled the house, and I found myself spending hours with him, letting my heart soak in the simple joy of having him close.

But there was something else too. My connection with nature—the strange, mystical pull that had been growing within me for years—was becoming stronger, almost overpowering at times. I felt more in tune with the world around me, more connected to the whispers of the wind, the sounds of the animals, the heartbeat of the earth itself.

Everything around me spoke in its own silent language—moments aligning with purpose, events unfolding with strange precision. The air carried a sense of direction, urging me forward through the maze of changes. Too much was happening all at once—threads weaving through my life, each one tugging at me with quiet insistence.

Yet in the middle of it all, clarity began to rise. I was no longer the hesitant child who once lingered in the background. A new version of me was taking shape—steadier, bolder, prepared for whatever waited beyond the horizon.

I had always sensed a bond with nature, something raw and instinctive, but now it pulsed stronger than ever. The elements no longer stayed at a distance—they engaged, moved with intention, echoing my inner world. The wind didn't just stir leaves; it whispered to me. The trees didn't merely sway; they acknowledged my presence. And the rain—above all—carried a weight, a rhythm, that touched something deep within me. It was no longer just weather; it was a conversation.

Whenever sorrow crept in or the weight of the world grew too heavy, the sky responded. Rain would begin—steady and unwavering—mirroring the unrest within me. At first, I brushed it off, blaming the season or coincidence. But the more it happened, the harder it became to deny the strange harmony between my inner world and the elements.

Then came the pull—always toward the north. Each time I raised my hand in that direction, a subtle charge stirred the air, brushing my skin, awakening something deep inside. I couldn't explain it, but it was real—an invisible thread tightening, calling me toward something unnamed. With

every passing day, the energy swelled, not just around me, but within me. Whatever it was, it wasn't ordinary. And it was growing harder to ignore.

One evening, the sky turned heavy with storm clouds. The air was thick, charged with electricity, the kind that sends shivers down your spine. The wind howled through the trees, rattling the windows and making the world outside feel untamed and dangerous.

I found myself on the roof, alone, watching the dark clouds swirl above me. There was a certain peace in the chaos—a peace that only came from being at the edge of something unknown, something vast and powerful.

I sat there, letting the gusts of wind whip through my hair, when suddenly, she appeared, and the third Miracle happened.

One of the Matrikas.

She didn't make an entrance. One moment I was alone, and the next, she was sitting beside me—effortless, unannounced. Her presence didn't disturb the silence; it gave it meaning. I wasn't lost in a vision or swept up in imagination. I was awake—fully aware.

Every breath felt heavier, every heartbeat sharper. She belonged to that moment, with time itself appearing to pause around her. No illusions, no confusion. Just her—undeniably real, and closer than anything I'd ever known.

She was beautiful, in a way that was almost too perfect, too ethereal to belong to this world. Her skin was smooth and pale, and her body was adorned in a dark, silky suit, so

seamless it appeared to be a part of her, flowing like liquid over her curves. She couldn't have been much older than her early twenties—youthful, radiant, yet ancient in the way only beings beyond time can be. Her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders, framing a face that carried both the softness of youth and the wisdom of the ages. Her eyes, calm yet intense, held a gaze that pierced straight into my soul.

She sat close enough that I could feel the energy radiating off her, but she wasn't intimidating. There was a serenity in her posture, in the way she observed the world around her, and in the way her presence made the winds feel gentler, the chaos of the storm settling into quiet reverence around us.

I didn't know what to say, but I had to start somewhere.

"What's your name?" I asked, my voice low but clear. I had never learned their names—the Matrikas who had guarded me all my life.

She turned to me, a soft smile playing on her lips, amused by the question. "The one you call me," she said. It wasn't an answer in the usual sense—it was a riddle. One that made it clear she hadn't come to offer easy truths.

"What does that mean?" I pressed. "Do you even have a name?" There was an edge of frustration in my voice now. My life had become a series of riddles, and I was growing tired of being left in the dark. I needed answers, not more mysteries.

She chuckled softly, her eyes catching a flicker of mysterious light. "You call me by my name," she said again, her smile stretching wider—playful, knowing. She held the answer close, not out of cruelty, but with the quiet patience of someone who understands the power of waiting.

I sighed, running my hand through my hair. "Why are you here?" I asked, deciding to skip the games and get to the heart of the matter.

Her gaze softened as she turned to face me fully. "To resolve what disturbs you," she answered, her tone almost soothing. There was no mockery in her voice, no malice. Only calm certainty.

I realized that if I wanted any clarity, I needed to stop dancing around the questions. "Why me?" I asked, my frustration simmering beneath the surface. Why was I chosen for this? Why was my life filled with these strange encounters and unanswered questions?

Her reply struck with the weight of finality. "Heaven chooses the one. We protect them."

Those words rang in my mind—unyielding, unanswerable. Chosen by heaven? The thought offered no comfort, only a surge of unrest. Who made such choices? And why me?

"Where are the others?" I asked, thinking of the two Matrikas who had visited my dreams before.

"We come and go by command," she answered, her voice composed, untouched by the chaos that churned inside me. Her detachment only deepened the storm I was trying to contain.

"Who orders you?" I demanded, leaning in closer, hoping to catch a flicker of something—anything—in her expression.

Her eyes darkened, just for a second, before she answered, "The one who manages you."

My mind raced, trying to piece together these fragments of cryptic responses. The storm around us mirrored the turmoil inside me—gusts of wind whipping through the air, the occasional crackle of distant thunder. She was so calm, and I—I was unraveling.

"Are there more like me?" The words slipped out before I could stop them. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer, but the question burned inside me.

Was I truly alone in this?

Her response chilled me to the bone. "You multiply as the earth multiplies."

My mind flashed back to the dream I had once had, where I fell from the cliff into the bed of lotus flowers, surrounded by countless reflections of myself.

Uncountable versions of me, scattered across realities, all existing in some strange, mystical convergence. What did it mean? Were there really others like me, or were they all just versions of the same fate?

"Am I cursed?" I asked, the words heavy with fear and uncertainty. I had no idea if I was on a path of redemption or destruction.

"The cursed will be left, and the blessed will proceed." Her answer was as enigmatic as everything else she said, but it struck me somewhere deep within. Was I still being tested? Was I cursed, or was I the one chosen to move forward?

"What will decide whether I'm cursed or blessed?" I pressed, desperate for something—anything concrete to hold onto.

"Time."

The single word felt like the slamming of a door in my face. Time? Time would decide everything. And time, as always, was patient while I was not.

"When will it end?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly. "When will this journey end?"

She looked at me with something like pity, though her face remained still. "Neither it starts nor it ends."

The words hit me like a weight. There was no escape, no finish line, no resolution. I was trapped in an endless loop of fate, caught between the beginning and the end.

I needed Kalindi. I needed her to anchor me, to pull meaning from the chaos unraveling around me. But she was gone—and in her absence, I stood alone before a mystical presence whose every word twisted deeper into enigma.

The ground trembled beneath my feet, reality warping beneath the sheer weight of the truth she carried, bending the world into something unrecognizable.

And then, without warning, I asked something that had been gnawing at the back of my mind: "Can I love?"

She turned to me, her eyes soft but distant. "The chosen will live alone."

The answer felt like a punch to the gut. **Alone.** I was destined to live alone. Was this the price I had to pay for whatever I was becoming? Was I truly meant to walk this path with no one beside me?

"Will I have a family? Children?" My voice broke slightly as I asked. I needed to know if there was any chance of a normal life—or if that too was being stripped away from me.

She smiled again, that same gentle, cryptic smile. "Father of one or father of all," she said, her words heavy with meaning, though I couldn't grasp their full implications.

I was spiraling now, my mind grasping at straws. "Will you always protect me?" I asked, desperate for some assurance that I wasn't completely alone.

She met my gaze, her expression softening. "I play the role well," she said, her voice like a whisper of wind, a promise that felt both comforting and distant at the same time.

"What is my purpose?" I asked the final, burning question that had been clawing at me from the beginning.

She leaned in close, so close that I could feel her presence hovering just inches from me. "You create and lead. Those who are broken, lead them well, my master," she whispered into my ear, her breathless voice sending chills down my spine. Her scent filled the air around me—a strange, intoxicating blend of many fragrances, each one layered with a depth that was almost overpowering.

Each note of her scent struck with precision—layered, deliberate—composing an aroma so intricate it defied understanding.

And then, without a word, she was gone.

She vanished into the air, her form dissolving into a swarm of bats that erupted from her body, their wings flapping wildly as they disappeared into the night sky. One moment she was

there, and the next, she was nothing but a memory, her presence replaced by the distant howling of the wind.

I sat there, stunned and silent, my mind reeling from the conversation, from the sheer weight of what had just happened. I knew, without a doubt, that this time it was real. I wasn't dreaming. I wasn't trapped in a vision. I was fully awake, fully aware, and the Matrika had come to me.

As I sat on the roof, staring at the spot she had just left, a quiet realization settled in—I was only beginning to grasp the depths of what was unfolding within me. The answers I longed for remained distant, veiled in riddles and layered mysteries only time could unravel.

I went down as darkness settled over the house. Without bothering with dinner, I went straight to bed. Outside, a fierce storm raged, the wind howling through the night. But nothing—nothing—could have prepared me for what would happen that night.

I had fallen asleep, exhausted from the day's chaos. The dream came suddenly, without warning, pulling me into its dark and terrifying grip. At first, it was just shadows—faint shapes in the distance, moving silently in the darkness. But then, everything became clear, too clear. I saw death.

I saw my grandfather lying still—his face drained of color, his body already touched by the cold grip of death. He was gone. And there stood Mai-sa, trembling above him, her frame too delicate to carry the blow that had just struck her soul. Her knees gave way, and in that moment, something far greater than a fall occurred—reality fractured.

The light in her eyes dimmed. Not from age or fatigue, but from something deeper—an inner collapse. Her body remained, but her spirit began to drift. Illness crept in, slow and merciless, devouring her memories until only fragments remained—scattered echoes on the edge of silence.

Then came Aunt Damayanti, stepping into the void with quiet triumph. Her presence swept through the house not with mourning, but with ambition. Behind her polished smile lay a sharpened will. With whispers and gestures, she bent the household to her command—each move calculated, each word a thread in the web she now controlled.

The dream tore itself apart. I saw my family hurled out—discarded, stripped of dignity, struggling to survive in the ruins of what once was. We had become invisible, our existence reduced to nothing.

A crushing weight pressed against my chest. My heartbeat roared—not with life, but with dread. In the chaos, I saw myself—utterly alone, every face I once loved turned away. The Matrikas—those divine guardians who once shielded me—were gone. Not departed, but erased.

They dissolved into shadow, leaving behind no trace, no warmth, no whisper of their presence. I called out, my voice breaking into the silence, echoing through the emptiness. But nothing answered.

No one answered.

I stood forsaken, a curse stitched into my being. Loneliness coiled around me—tight, breathless, inescapable.

The scenes kept shifting, each one more terrifying than the last. My father was in the hospital, his body weak, his face pale. My mother stood beside him, tears streaming down her face as she cried for him, her hands trembling as she held on to him.

The pain in her eyes was unbearable, a sorrow so deep that it burned into my soul. I wanted to help, to do something, but I was powerless. I could only watch as everything I loved crumbled around me.

And then—Kalindi. My sister. My anchor. The soul I once believed would never drift from mine. I reached for her, aching for the comfort only she could bring. But she turned away.

She cast me out with silence. Her back stood between us, rigid and cold, denying me entry into a world that once belonged to both of us. In that instant, I was erased.

Her rejection didn't break me—it buried me. A deeper wound than any betrayal, one that throbbed beneath every breath. What had once been unshakable between us lay in ruins. And I stood alone, surrounded not by absence, but by the ghost of what we used to be.

The dream spiralled further into madness. Aunt Sumitra and Uncle, the ones I had always loved, the ones who had always cared for me, told me to leave. Their faces were hard, their voices stern. I was no longer welcome. The home that had once been my sanctuary had turned against me. I was cast out, forsaken.

Suddenly, the sky split open above me, but instead of the comforting light of the heavens, there was a churning, ominous mass of dark water—thick, suffocating, and cold.

This was no rain, no gentle stream washing over the earth—it was the weight of an ocean suspended above me, pressing down with merciless force, ready to crush everything beneath it. The sky poured darkness, and even the air grew thick with sorrow, dense and unmoving, stripped of all faith. It was as if the world itself had surrendered.

I could barely breathe. Every gasp for air felt like I was swallowing water, choking on the weight of something unseen, something dark. And then, I looked below. What I saw froze the blood in my veins.

The valley was burning. Flames licked at the earth, consuming everything in their path. The once-green hills were charred black, rivers of fire running through them like molten veins.

Animals screamed in agony, their bodies engulfed in flames, their cries piercing the thick, smoke-filled air. Their legs buckled under them, their eyes wide with terror, and one by one, they collapsed into the inferno, their bodies disappearing into the blaze, leaving only ashes behind.

Without warning, I felt the ground beneath me disappear. I was thrown from the heavens, my body spiralling uncontrollably through the air. The world around me twisted into a chaotic swirl of fire and darkness, spinning faster and faster until I lost all sense of direction. I was falling, falling into the madness below.

And then, with a jarring thud, I landed—not on the ground, but on the back of a beast. A lion—massive and terrifying, its golden mane ablaze with fire. Its eyes glowed with a spectral light, and its muscles rippled beneath me as it stood tall, defiant, at the edge of a cliff that overlooked the burning world below. I clung to its back, the heat from its body searing into my skin, but I couldn't let go. I was powerless, a passenger in this nightmare.

From the hilltop, I could see everything in horrifying detail. The valley stretched out before me, but it was no longer a place of life. It had become a graveyard. The earth was littered with the bodies of the dead—twisted, broken, their limbs scattered like discarded toys.

Their faces were frozen in eternal screams, eyes wide with the terror they must have felt in their final moments. The stench of death saturated the air, thick and suffocating, tangled with the acrid scent of burning flesh.

And then, I saw them—the survivors. They were few, but they were there, writhing in the fire, their bodies consumed by the flames but not yet dead.

They reached out with twisted, blackened fingers, their skin peeling and curling away from the bone as the fire devoured them slowly. Their voices, hoarse and broken, called out to me—begging, pleading for salvation.

"Help us!" they cried, their voices piercing through the roar of the flames. Eyes wide with terror and hollow from despair, they fixed on mine—pleading, demanding salvation. But my limbs refused to answer.

My mouth held no words. I stood rooted, powerless, as their bodies writhed in agony, flames coiling around them, devouring flesh and memory. One by one, they crumbled into ash, their screams etched into the smoke rising toward a merciless sky.

The heat was relentless—not just around me, but within. It surged through my veins, an inferno ignited from the core, burning without mercy. Flames crept along my arms, across my chest, up to my face, until I too was engulfed—no longer separate from the fire, but part of its fury. I burned with it, consumed from the inside out, indistinguishable from the blaze that was swallowing everything.

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Only heat. Only fire.

I looked down at my hands, expecting to see flesh, but instead, I saw flames—my fingers were burning, my skin peeling away in thick, blackened sheets, exposing the bone underneath. The fire wasn't just outside me—it was inside me, burning me from the inside out. I was on fire.

This was hell.

As I looked around, helpless to stop the destruction unfolding before me, I realised something terrible—I wasn't just a victim of this nightmare. I was a part of it. The fire wasn't something I was witnessing. It was something I was creating. I was the cause of the destruction, the architect of this burning world.

The lion beneath me unleashed a deafening roar, its mane flaring with a fierce, unnatural blaze. As it rose at the cliff's edge, the air cracked open—charged, unsteady. A force surged

through my body, raw and ancient, steeped in shadows. It carried the weight of the forgotten, the agony of the lost—suffering handed down through time, now burning in my hands, demanding reckoning.

I held the power of death.

And yet, even with all that power, I was powerless to stop what was happening. The dead lay scattered at my feet, and the living burned, and I could do nothing. Their eyes, full of despair, haunted me, and I knew that no matter how much I wanted to help, I couldn't. I was trapped in this nightmare, and there was no escape.

I tried to close my eyes, to make it all disappear, but the images stayed—burning into my mind, etched into my soul. The bodies, the flames, the cries for help. They were a part of me now, a part of this power I hadn't asked for, but could not deny.

I was the beginning and the end. The hand that built, and the force that broke. Saviour to some, curse to others—and to myself, both.

And as I looked down into the valley of death below, I knew one thing with chilling certainty: this was the future. This was what awaited me.

And then I woke up.

It was pitch dark, the moonlight streaming through the window, casting a cold, silver glow over my room. But the warmth, the **burning heat** from the dream, was still with me.

It burned beneath my skin, deep in my bones. My body lay sprawled on the floor, drenched—not just in sweat, but in the

aftermath of something searing. Heat radiated from me, raw and consuming.

I had been torn from the heart of the blaze and hurled back into existence. My breath came in broken bursts, each gasp dragging air into a chest pounding with relentless force.

The dream had been too real. The ash, the heat, the pain—it was still with me, lingering in the air like smoke. I sat there, my mind spinning, trying to make sense of it all. The images played over and over in my head—my family's downfall, my abandonment, the fire, the dead bodies. The fear gripped me, hard and relentless, as I wondered if this was my future.

Was this what the future had in store for me? Would I be left alone to face this hell? My body trembled as I tried to push the thoughts away, but they wouldn't leave me. The dream had shaken something inside me, something deep, something primal.

For the first time in my life, I had seen the darkness that could be waiting for me, and the fear of it wrapped around me like chains, dragging me down into the abyss.

Chapter 10

Unfolding Hearts

The recent, miraculous conversation with one of the Matrikas and the nightmarish vision of hell had shaken me to my core. My mind was a storm of unanswered questions, divine riddles, and unbearable weight.

By morning, I stood up with a singular, burning desire that pulsed through my veins—I had to find her, the girl who had captured my heart in that fleeting, unforgettable moment.

The mysteries swirling around me, the crushing pressure from whatever higher powers watched over me—none of it mattered as much as this. I needed her. Somehow, I knew that if I could just find her, I could make sense of this tangled, chaotic life that was spiraling further out of control.

If I was the special one, the chosen one, then surely I could find a way to bring her into my life. After all, wasn't I also deserving happiness? Didn't I have a right to love? The recent encounters with the Matrikas had made me rigid, stubborn, almost reckless.

The harder the universe pressed against me, the fiercer my resolve grew. I was consumed—driven by a wild, unrelenting need to reach her. Every nerve blazed with the hunger to see her once more, to show her that somewhere in this vast, indifferent world, a heart beat solely for her—with a depth beyond imagination.

I needed her to know what I had endured. To see the storm, I had been walking through. To truly understand me—not as a nameless face lost in the crowd, but as the one whose soul ached for her. Everything in me—memory, breath, heartbeat—revolved around that truth.

She was the one constant in my mind, the one person who hadn't yet been touched by the madness of my life, and I couldn't bear the thought of her slipping away into the haze of unfulfilled dreams.

The weight of these thoughts was unbearable. I grabbed my bicycle, my heart pounding in my chest, and set off—determined to find her. I didn't have a plan. I had nothing but the burning desire in my heart and the fragments of hope that had somehow survived the tempest my life had become.

I pedaled faster, harder, my mind racing with every turn of the wheel. The world around me blurred as I moved through the streets, searching, hoping that somehow, fate would guide me to her.

But even as I searched for her, I began to feel a strange presence. The Matrikas were following me. I couldn't see them, not with my eyes, but I could feel them—their energy, their gaze.

Shadows moved just beyond reach—invisible, yet unmistakably present. Each time I caught my reflection in a shop window or a water-filled puddle, they flickered at the edges—faces unreadable, their presence weighted with quiet menace. They were always near—hovering, watching, waiting.

And then it hit me—they were afraid. The Matrikas weren't here to shield me. Not this time. They had come to intervene. My sudden obsession with finding her had fractured something—disturbed the design stitched into fate itself.

Their presence rippled with unease, movements sharp and restless, cloaked in shifting shadow. They didn't want this meeting. They didn't want me to reach her. My defiance had awakened something beyond even their reach, and now they scrambled to pull the threads back into place before it unraveled completely.

I could feel their fear, their desperation. But that only fueled my resolve. I was not going to give up. No one, not even the forces of heaven, could stop me now. I had waited too long, suffered too much in silence. I was burning with a need so powerful it drowned out everything else. I would meet her, no matter the cost. I would find her.

The world twisted around me as I sped through the streets, every turn driven by the storm inside my mind—her name, her face, the pull I could no longer resist. The Matrikas lingered at the edges of my awareness, their presence tightening with every block I crossed, pressing against my will. They wanted to stop me, to steer me away. But I refused to yield.

I remembered every detail I had gathered—small clues, quiet fragments of her world collected through hushed

conversations and the help of friends. Piece by piece, I had built a picture of her life, drawing connections from the scattered whispers passed through classmates.

And then came the clarity: she was real. Her name was Harleen. That much was certain.

But certainty didn't silence the doubt. A deeper question stirred within me—was she truly the girl I had seen on that stage? The one whose eyes had met mine and changed something in me forever?

Inside, a quiet war raged. One force urged me forward, relentless in its pull. The other held me back, warning me to stop before everything unraveled.

After what felt like an endless chase through a city that no longer resembled itself, I arrived—heart pounding, breath shallow—outside her house.

Her home was on the first floor, and below it was a small bank. The building looked almost too ordinary for the extraordinary importance it held in my heart. The stairs leading up to her door felt like a bridge between two worlds—one that I lived in and another that she inhabited. I stood there, just beneath the stairs, my heart hammering in my chest.

I waited.

And waited.

I stood there, my eyes fixed on the entrance to her home. Four hours passed, and with each minute, my heart grew heavier. She didn't come. She didn't come from outside, nor did she leave the house. Fate had played its hand well. The

universe, the Matrikas—they had managed to stop this meeting from happening. As I stood there, my hope began to slip away, and with it, my sense of control.

All I wanted was to see her, just once, to assure myself that she was real, that she wasn't just some figment of my mind conjured from a fleeting moment. I needed to believe that she was there for me, that somehow, amidst all this madness, we were meant to be together. But destiny had other plans.

Defeated, I rode back home. My thoughts raced faster than the wheels of my bicycle. The Matrikas had won this round, but my resolve had not been broken. I would find her again. I would think of a new way, a new approach. I was restless, consumed by this desire to see her, to speak to her. It had overpowered me completely.

Nothing else mattered anymore. Not the visions, not the riddles, not the weight of destiny. She was my purpose now, and I wouldn't rest until she knew how I felt.

The next day, I was back on my bicycle, my heart still burning with the same fervor. I searched for her again, retracing my steps, hoping that fate would finally allow us to meet. I couldn't concentrate on anything else.

My life had become a blur of longing and frustration, my mind filled with nothing but thoughts of her. The fear of losing her forever gnawed at me, a constant, unbearable ache.

And all the while, I could feel them—the Matrikas. Their presence was stronger than ever, their invisible forms lingering at the edges of my vision. They were not my protectors anymore, not in this.

They were my obstacles. And I couldn't shake the feeling that they were trying to stop something, something that even heaven hadn't foreseen. Our meeting could trigger something far more profound than even I could understand.

I didn't care. I was willing to risk everything—even the will of heaven—just to see her. This time, nothing could stop me.

My mind was still spinning, trying to make sense of the chaos, but amidst it all, one thing remained clear—I needed to find her. She was real, I knew it now. She was out there, somewhere, waiting to be found. and I couldn't stop myself from seeking it, even if the heavens themselves tried to interfere.

I managed to get her home phone number. The first time I called, my heart pounded in my chest, my palms sweaty as I held the receiver. But when someone picked up on the other end, I froze. I had no idea what to say, no plan, no details.

What could I possibly say to explain the feelings that had consumed me? So, I hung up, my mind racing. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. I needed more information, more certainty.

Then, I learned that she attended a tuition class near her home with a friend. I got the address, the timings, and that was all I needed. My resolve solidified. No matter what, I had to see her. I had to know if this girl was the same one who had captured my heart.

In those days, I was absent from everything else. My mind was somewhere far away, caught up in thoughts of her. I barely noticed my surroundings anymore. I didn't care what I was wearing, what I looked like, or what people thought.

All I could think about was her. Every moment, every breath, was filled with thoughts of her—her smile, her eyes, the way she made me feel like the universe had shifted just for us.

That day, I rode my bicycle to the address. The winter air was cold and crisp, the last remnants of fog lifting as the pale sunlight filtered through the clouds. It was around 4:00 PM, the light soft and hazy. I could feel the anticipation building inside me, each pedal stroke bringing me closer to the moment I had dreamed of. I didn't know what I was going to say, or how she would react, but I had to see her.

I arrived outside the tuition class, waiting with bated breath, my heart pounding louder than the distant sounds of the streets. And then, there she was.

She stepped out, her figure framed by the soft light of the fading afternoon. She wore a white and pink sweater, her skin glowing like jasmine, soft and delicate. Her hair was pulled back into a long braid, flowing down her back like a gentle river. She had spectacles on her face, which only added to the quiet elegance she carried. She was smaller than me in height, but there was something so powerful about her presence. Her eyes... her eyes did all the talking.

She stood there, on her bicycle, not more than a few feet away from me. Time slowed down, the world around us fading into the background as my gaze locked onto her. She was real. She was here, in front of me, and my heart nearly burst with the realization.

Summoning all the courage I had left, I called out, "Excuse me..."

She turned toward me, her eyes meeting mine, and then, she smiled. That smile. It was the same one from that day, the one that had been etched into my soul ever since. In that moment, everything I had been feeling—the longing, the confusion, the madness—it all melted away, leaving only her and me.

"Yes?" she said, her voice soft and warm, slicing gently through the cold pressing against the walls. Her eyes shimmered with a quiet knowing—an unspoken recognition that told me she was aware. She knew I had been searching for her.

I stood frozen, gaze locked on hers, every word I had rehearsed vanishing from my mind. I had lived this moment in my thoughts a thousand times, but now, face-to-face, language abandoned me. I was caught in her presence—completely, hopelessly lost.

Beside her, her friend spoke up, "Harleen, what's happened to him?" She grabbed Harleen's hand, her own curiosity piqued. Her friend was tall, beautiful in her own right, but no one compared to Harleen in my eyes. Harleen. Her name was Harleen. The sound of it echoed in my mind, filling every corner of my heart.

Then, a loud horn blared somewhere in the distance, pulling me back to reality. Harleen was still looking at me, waiting, her eyes filled with quiet amusement.

Suddenly, I regained my senses. "Will you become my friend?" The words tumbled out of my mouth, unfiltered and raw.

Her expression changed slightly, curiosity now mixing with something else. "Why?" she asked, her voice steady but questioning. "Why are you searching for me?"

I hesitated for a moment, my mind racing. I had been searching for her so intensely, so desperately, but now that she was asking me, I wasn't sure how to explain it. "Yes," I said bluntly, my heart beating wildly. "I was searching for you."

Her gaze deepened, as though she was trying to read the truth behind my words. "But why?" she asked again, this time more seriously.

"To make you my friend," I replied, the words falling from my lips without hesitation.

She stared at me, her eyes narrowing slightly, and then she said, "I do not become friends with strangers." There was a slight sternness to her voice, but it wasn't harsh—it was careful. She was weighing my intentions.

"But if two strangers don't become friends, how will they ever get to know each other?" I asked, my voice quiet but sincere. There was no pretense in what I said—it was simple, pure truth.

She didn't respond immediately, but she gave a slow nod, acknowledging the weight of my words. Still, a flicker of hesitation lingered in her eyes.

"So, are we friends, Harleen?" I asked again, feeling the weight of the moment pressing down on me. I needed to hear her answer.

She smiled, that soft, knowing smile hiding a thousand secrets. "Let me think about it," she said, her voice playful, and then she began to walk away.

I couldn't let her go, not without some assurance, something to hold onto. "When will we meet again?" I called after her, my voice rising in urgency.

She turned, eyes glinting with mischief, her smile a quiet challenge wrapped in elegance. "When the time is right," she said, her voice light, drifting through the air with the ease of a secret shared only once. And then she was gone—vanishing into the folds of the fog-draped evening, leaving silence in her wake.

When the right time comes. The words echoed in my mind, a riddle that only added to the countless others that had filled my life. Why was everything a puzzle? Why couldn't anything be simple? Even in love, it seemed I was bound by some cosmic plan that kept pushing and pulling me in different directions.

But despite the riddles, I couldn't help but smile. She had left, but not without leaving a promise of something more. And in that moment, I knew that I would wait for her, no matter how long it took.

Because she was different, and I was certain now more than ever that she was meant for me. Even if the universe had tried to stop this meeting, it had failed. I had found her. And I wasn't going to let her slip away.

But as the night settled in, the feeling of unease returned. Though I had found her, I couldn't shake the sense that

something larger was at play. Something that even the Matrikas, even the heavens, hadn't planned for.

I was falling behind in my studies. My grades had slipped so drastically that I couldn't even secure enough marks to pass the 9th standard. Both my parents were deeply disturbed, especially my father. I could see the disappointment in his eyes, which was far more painful than anything he could have said.

One afternoon, my worst fear came true—my father was summoned to the school. The principal, known for his strict demeanor and no-nonsense attitude, held a detailed conversation with him. They discussed my falling grades, my lack of focus, and the warning that was now hanging over my head like a sword.

I was promoted with a condition: if I couldn't score more than 70% in the first set of exams, I would be demoted back to the 9th grade. The principal made it clear that the school's excellent board results couldn't be risked for a student like me—one who had suddenly become a liability.

When my father returned home, he sat me down. His usual calm presence was clouded with concern. "What's going on?" he asked, his voice softer than usual but carrying the weight of his disappointment. "Why have your grades fallen so much? You've never struggled like this before." His eyes searched mine for an answer, for anything that could make sense of the mess I had become.

But what could I tell him? The truth? That I was completely infatuated with a girl, and she was all I could think about? That my world revolved around her, and schoolwork had

taken a backseat to my daydreams about meeting her again, talking to her, seeing her smile? Was this who I had become—someone so lost in the fantasy of love that I couldn't focus on the reality of my own future? I was torn between what I felt and what was expected of me.

The silence between us stretched on, my father waiting for an explanation I couldn't give. I wanted to speak, to explain the consuming feelings that had taken over my life, but how could I? How could I admit that I was letting everything slip through my fingers for something so intangible, something that had no place in the structured world of exams and results?

I felt trapped—trapped between my emotions and my responsibilities. I had failed not just in my studies but in finding a balance between who I was and who I was expected to be. I looked at my father, my heart heavy with shame. His trust in me was slipping, and I could see that he feared for my future. The weight of his worry pressed down on me, but still, I said nothing.

I couldn't bear to tell him that I was a prisoner to my feelings, that my obsession with this girl had consumed me to the point where nothing else mattered. The love I felt, so all-encompassing, now looked like a weakness—something pulling me away from the path I was supposed to be on. This wasn't who I was meant to be, was it? Was this my destiny, to fail at what was expected of me because I couldn't control my heart?

The conversation ended with my father walking away, leaving me alone to wrestle with my thoughts. I had a decision to make: continue down this path of distraction and risk

losing everything, or find a way to reconcile my emotions with my responsibilities. But how could I? How could I balance the chaotic storm inside me with the cold, hard demands of the outside world?

The future loomed ahead, uncertain and terrifying. I had been given a second chance by the school, but it felt like my last. And I had no idea how I would navigate the dangerous waters I had created for myself.

A few days passed, and fate, as unpredictable as ever, brought us together again. It wasn't planned, just one of those moments that seem to happen when the universe has other plans.

I was rounding a corner at a school event, a grand competition where students from different schools gathered. My mind had been lost in the usual chaos—the confusion of recent events, the cryptic words from the Matrika, and the lingering feeling that everything was pushing me toward her.

And then, suddenly, there she was. Harleen.

I didn't even see her until it was almost too late. I nearly collided with her, and for a split second, time slowed down. She stumbled, her body tipping slightly forward, and instinctively, she reached out, her hand grabbing mine.

She didn't fall, but she leaned into me just enough to make me aware of the warmth of her presence. My heart hammered in my chest, the rhythm chaotic, a wild drumbeat that filled my ears.

I turned, her hand still in mine, and there she was. The same girl who had stolen my heart that day on the stage. My

mind raced back to the moment she had told me, "We will meet when the time is right." Was this the moment she had been talking about? Was this the right time? I couldn't tell, but my thoughts spiraled in a thousand directions all at once.

Her eyes met mine, and for a second, the rest of the world disappeared. There was nothing but her. The crowd, the noise—it all faded.

The air around us was filled with the sweetness of spring. Flowers bloomed everywhere, their vivid colors bursting through the green landscape, while a soft breeze carried the delicate scent of jasmine and wild blossoms.

The air pulsed with a sharper energy, echoing the unrest building in my chest. Sunlight spilled through the canopy, scattering shadows across the earth, while the warmth of the season folded around us in a quiet hush.

"Will you help me?" she asked, her voice slicing through the fog of my thoughts. Her hand still gripped mine—steady, grounding—holding the moment in place amid the rising chaos.

"Oh, sure," I managed to reply, snapping back to reality. I pulled her gently to her feet, her hand soft in mine.

She rose to her feet and smiled—that same unforgettable smile, etched into my memory since the very first day. "So, we meet again," she said, her tone playful, edged with a knowing ease, as though this moment had always been waiting for us.

I returned the smile, the warmth of it unfurling through me. "Yes, and with any luck, next time I'll manage not to collide with anyone—especially not a complete stranger," I

said, aiming for sarcasm, though it landed closer to nervous charm.

She tilted her head slightly, her eyes full of curiosity. "So, you're still annoyed?" she asked, playfully challenging me.

By now, both of our friends had wandered off, leaving the two of us standing alone in the heart of the crowded event. The world flowed around us—noise, color, movement—yet we remained still, suspended in a moment untouched by everything else.

I let out a breath and shook my head. "No, not annoyed," I said quietly. "Just... it was vague."

There was a trace of frustration in my tone, not sharp, but restless—the kind that came from trying to understand someone who constantly slipped through my fingers, always just out of reach.

Without warning, she caught my hand again, this time deliberately. "Let's be friends," she said, her voice soft but full of meaning.

I could barely contain the joy surging inside me. This was all I had wanted. Her words, simple as they were, carried the weight of a thousand dreams. But I didn't show it. On the outside, I kept my cool, but deep inside, I was burning with happiness. This was the moment I had been longing for, the moment I had thought about in every quiet second since the day I first saw her.

"Yes," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady, though my heart was soaring.

I smiled, feeling my pulse quicken as I looked at her. "So, may I know something about my new friend?" I asked, my voice light but filled with curiosity. Her eyes sparkled as she turned toward me, her face glowing in the golden light of the late spring afternoon.

"Yes," she continued, "I'm Harleen Kaur. My father is a banker, my mother is a housewife, and I have two younger siblings—a brother and a sister."

As she spoke, I barely heard the words. Her lips moved, but my mind was somewhere else, entranced by the gentle curve of her smile and the way her long hair was neatly braided, falling gracefully down her back.

A delicate blush bloomed across her cheeks as she spoke, adding an unspoken grace to the moment. Her voice carried a rhythm all its own—soft, melodic—and I found myself drawn into it, the noise of the world dissolving until only the two of us remained. Around us, the air held the promise of new beginnings, wrapping the silence in warmth and quiet wonder.

She noticed my distracted state, and with a playful nudge, she pulled me back to reality. "What about you?" she asked, tilting her head. "I deserve to know something about my first male friend, don't you think?"

First male friend. The words lingered in the air between us. She had never had a male friend before, and suddenly, that fact made this moment feel even more significant. I swallowed hard, feeling the pressure of her gaze on me. She was watching me so closely, waiting for an answer, and yet all I could do was stammer.

"Me... me?" I managed, my voice awkward, betraying the nerves that twisted inside me.

She smiled, her eyes softening. "Yes, you. I'd like to know something about you," she said, and there was a warmth in her voice that made my heart flutter.

"Well, you're my first female friend," I finally managed, my voice quiet but sincere.

Her eyes brightened, and she gave a soft laugh. "Oh, so we're both new to this, huh?" she said, her voice filled with gentle humor. "It seems we've both entered uncharted territory."

For a moment, we stood there smiling, a quiet understanding passing between us—an unspoken recognition of something new taking root. Today, she carried a different energy—more open, more engaged. In our earlier encounters, her words had been brief, her presence guarded. But now, her eyes held curiosity, her questions came easily, and it felt like she had been waiting for this moment just as long as I had.

We walked side by side for a while, our conversation light, threaded with the thrill of something just beginning. A gentle breeze stirred, carrying the scent of blooming jasmine and freshly cut grass, and for a moment, the air tasted sweeter. Everything around us softened—the noise, the movement, the distractions—until only her voice remained, echoing in the quiet corners of my mind.

Just as the moment began to settle, grounding itself in something steady and real, her friend Mandeep appeared, shattering the calm.

"Harleen, you must see this!" Mandeep called, grabbing her arm and pulling her away, though Harleen hesitated for a moment, her gaze lingering on mine.

I wanted to stop her, to ask her to stay, but I knew I couldn't. Nature had given us this moment, and now it was slipping away, as all beautiful things do. The winds whispered around us, the sky turning a soft shade of orange as the day began to fade.

Before she left, she turned back to me, her eyes meeting mine one last time. "We'll meet soon," she called out, her voice playful, her smile teasing me. But just as quickly, her words were swallowed by the noise of the crowd. She was gone.

And there I stood—heart full, yet threaded with ache. It was the sweetness of something beautiful and brief, a joy too fleeting to hold. Still, I had seen her again. That moment was mine, and for now, it was enough. More than enough.

That meeting changed something deep within me. The despair that once weighed on my heart began to lift, replaced by a surge of energy and purpose I hadn't known in months. The shadows that had followed me for so long began to clear, and light—steady, warm, undeniable—broke through.

Confidence returned—steady, grounded, unshaken. After months of uncertainty, something within had settled. The chaos around me no longer dictated my direction; everything began to fall into place with quiet precision.

I was moving into 10th Standard, still under strict watch, my teachers' warnings trailing behind me. But I was

prepared—clear-eyed, determined, and ready to meet whatever waited ahead.

I soon enrolled in Sir Stefen's classes for extra help in mathematics and physics. To my surprise, Harleen and her friend Mandeep were part of the same batch. This marked our third encounter, and with each crossing of paths, an invisible thread pulled us closer—stronger, more certain with every passing day.

My feelings for her had only grown stronger, and now that we were spending more time together, I knew that our bond would deepen, if only I could keep up with her in the classroom.

I worked harder than I ever had before. I didn't want Harleen to think I was falling behind, struggling with the subjects. She was good, but I knew that like me, she also had difficulty with these subjects, which was why she was there in the first place.

Sir Stefen had promised my father that he would ensure I performed well in mathematics and physics, and this time, I was determined to prove myself.

Then something shifted—sudden, powerful, almost unexplainable. The forces that had once scorched me from within now converged, no longer tearing me apart but rebuilding me from the core.

I began to thrive. Numbers lost their mystery and started speaking a language I understood. Patterns emerged effortlessly, and soon, I was solving complex problems before others had finished reading them. While pens scratched

across paper, the answers unfolded in my mind—clear, immediate.

Equations drifted through the space around me, glowing with quiet energy. Everything began to align, and for the first time, it all made sense.

During class, I could feel the eyes of my peers on me, whispers of admiration mixed with confusion, but the one gaze that mattered most was Harleen's. I saw the spark of admiration in her eyes, the way she watched me, impressed by my sudden transformation.

Her smile was enough to drive me forward, to push me further, and soon, I was the best in my class. When the results came, I didn't just top my class—I topped the entire 10th grade.

My father was proud, giving me an automatic scooter as a reward. It was more than just a gift—it was his way of showing that his faith in me had been restored. He believed in me again, and for the first time in a long while, so did I.

The future felt bright, the weight of my past struggles slowly lifting from my shoulders. I was certain I could ace my board exams—and with Harleen by my side, everything felt possible.

We started meeting almost every day. At times, it was just the two of us in the classroom—the others either late or not coming at all—and in those quiet moments, something between us began to take shape. It wasn't spoken aloud, yet it grew steadily, a closeness built in silence, each glance and pause adding another stone to the foundation we didn't need to name.

One day, we were alone again, and I couldn't resist asking her, "Harleen, we've become really good friends now. What do you like the most about me?"

She smiled, a playful light dancing in her eyes. "Firstly, your name," she said softly, "I feel crazy when I call you Rana."

"And what else?" I asked, eager to know more, my heart quickening in anticipation.

"Your voice," she said, continuing gently, "it's steady. And you carry yourself with such grace. You're thoughtful. Caring."

Her words moved through me, each one a note in a melody I didn't want to end. I held onto them, letting the sound of her voice pull me deeper into the moment.

"And what about me?" she asked, her tone softening—low, fragile, edged with a vulnerability rarely brought to the surface.

I hesitated, not because I didn't know the answer, but because there were too many things I wanted to say. "Your smile," I began, my voice barely above a whisper. "That was the first thing I noticed, the first thing I liked about you."

Her gaze softened, and I could feel the connection between us deepening with every word. "Your calmness," I added, "and your purity." She was so pure, so untouched by the harshness of the world. There were no filters with her, nothing hidden behind walls or masks. I loved her for that.

I continued, "The way you present yourself, the way you help others. The way you walk, the way you speak, the way you..." Before I could finish, she interrupted me, her playful smile disappearing into something more serious.

"Oh, stop, Rana!" she said, her voice sharp, yet there was a hint of amusement behind it. "Answer me straight. Do you like me?" Her bluntness caught me off guard. This was no longer a playful conversation—she wanted the truth. And for a moment, I was taken aback by how direct she was.

"Yes," I said, the word slipping out before I had the chance to overthink it. "Yes, I do."

"As a friend, or something more?" Her voice sharpened—steady, direct—driven by a need for truth no longer willing to wait.

Why are girls so straightforward? I thought, completely unprepared for this sudden shift. I had spoken to my sister Kalindi about these things, and she had trained me well, but now, faced with the girl I had been dreaming about, all that knowledge vanished. Still, I couldn't fail Kalindi's lessons now. So, I took a deep breath and decided to be honest.

"More than a friend," I admitted, "From the very first moment I saw you, when you were standing on that stage, handing out the prizes. I fell for you the moment we exchanged that smile."

Her reaction caught me off guard. She stared, expression unreadable, her silence stretching between us. I could see her mind racing—this wasn't what she had anticipated. She had expected hesitation, a deflection, perhaps even a carefully crafted excuse. But instead, I had placed everything in front of her—unfiltered, unapologetic.

Before she could respond, the sound of footsteps interrupted the moment. The other students entered the classroom, breaking the spell that had been cast between us.

Our conversation was left hanging, unfinished, and once again, I found myself at the mercy of fate, wondering why every special moment had to be interrupted. Couldn't I have just one normal moment? I thought to myself, frustrated.

The next time we crossed paths, she was quiet—no hint of what had passed between us. I wasn't surprised. Kalindi had prepared me for this. She had explained how, sometimes, when you speak the truth, it doesn't land all at once. It lingers, unsettles, takes root slowly.

Girls often step back, she had said—not out of rejection, but reflection. They retreat, creating space to feel, to understand. But given time, they return. Just as milk blends into water—not with force, but with patience—inevitable, seamless.

And so, I waited, knowing that Harleen and I had crossed a line, a line that we could never uncross. Something had begun between us, and though she was silent now, I knew that her heart was speaking just as loudly as mine.

Chapter 11

The Curse

It was a warm afternoon in May, and as I sat enjoying some precious moments with Harleen, the phone rang, cutting through the quiet hum of the day. I glanced at the screen and saw it was Kalindi. We spoke often, sharing everything from our dreams to our daily struggles. There were no secrets between us, or so I thought.

Her voice was soft, yet there was an unmistakable excitement in it. “I’m passing through the city,” she said, her words quick and filled with a kind of nervous energy. “I want you to meet someone.”

Something in the way she said it made my heart skip a beat. The tone of her voice shifted, dropping slightly, and that’s when it hit me—Kalindi was in love.

The same way I had spoken about Harleen, that same delicate hesitation was in her voice, the kind that hinted at feelings too powerful to put into words. She never mentioned his name directly, but over the last few months, she’d been dropping hints about someone—his likes, his dreams, the way he looked at the world.

Kalindi was in love, and my heart swelled with happiness for her. She deserved this—to be happy, to be cherished—and I was willing to do anything to protect that happiness.

My priorities shifted. Suddenly, my world became even clearer: Kalindi, Harleen, and my younger brother Rudra. These were the three people I loved more than anything else, and their happiness became the sole purpose of my existence.

The train details were clear, and without telling anyone, I rushed to the station. It was our secret. The anticipation was building as I waited at the platform, my heart pounding as I scanned the tracks for the incoming train. The air was thick with the smell of metal and oil, the hustle of people boarding and leaving, but my mind was entirely focused on Kalindi.

Suddenly, I heard the faint roar of the train in the distance. It grew louder, the ground beneath me trembling as it approached, and I could feel my energy surging. As the train passed by, I caught a glimpse of her—Kalindi, my sister, waving from the window of her coach.

I didn't hesitate for a second. I started running alongside the moving train, the wind rushing past me as I sprinted to catch up with her coach. I felt weightless, almost flying, like nothing in the world could slow me down. The mere thought of seeing her again after so long gave me strength I didn't know I had. My heart pounded, and my legs moved faster than ever, driven by pure excitement.

The train began to slow, and after what felt like an eternity of running, I reached her coach. The train came to a halt, and I stood there, breathless but smiling, as she stepped down from the train. There she was—Kalindi, the sister I adored,

looking as radiant as ever. Her smile lit up the platform, and I felt that familiar rush of love and pride that only she could make me feel.

She walked up to me with that playful glint in her eye, the same one she always had when she was about to surprise me. She leaned in close, her breath warm against my ear, and whispered, “I have a surprise for you.”

I smiled, already suspecting what this surprise was. “A surprise? Who?” I asked, my voice filled with curiosity, but my heart already knew.

Then he stepped out from behind her—tall, around five feet nine, with a wheatish complexion and an athletic frame. He carried himself with quiet confidence, standing beside her with the ease of someone who knew he belonged. His presence didn’t demand attention; it offered reassurance, steady and composed, the sort that makes you believe everything will be fine.

He matched the picture Kalindi had painted with her words. This was the boy she had given her heart to.

“Udai Dev Singh,” he said, his voice deep and steady, extending his hand toward me. I studied him for a moment—it didn’t take long. I liked him immediately. There was something in the way he stood, in the calm strength behind his eyes, in how he positioned himself beside my sister—not possessive, but protective. He belonged there. He made sense.

I reached out and pulled him into a hug, something he probably didn’t expect, but he responded with equal warmth. I could feel the bond between them, something deep and genuine that needed no words. The way they looked at each

other, the subtle glances, the spark that shone in their eyes. They were in love, and I was happy for her.

Kalindi's eyes were bright with happiness as she watched us. "I'm glad you like him," she whispered as she wrapped her arms around me in a hug. "I wanted your approval."

"You have it," I whispered back. "I'm happy for you both. He's family now." My voice was steady, but inside, I was overwhelmed with emotion. I was happy beyond words, knowing that Kalindi had found someone who made her feel safe, loved, and cherished.

She smiled, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I'm ready, then. Ready to take this step."

I looked at her, the sister who had always been my anchor, the one who had guided me through so many storms, and I said, "You're free to fly, Sis. The sky is yours, and I'll always be there behind you."

She hugged me tighter, and in that moment, I felt a surge of love so powerful it almost overwhelmed me. She was my sister, my blood, and nothing in the world mattered more than her happiness. I would fight the universe itself to protect her joy.

Then the train's horn pierced the distance—a sharp reminder of how quickly time slips away. A heaviness settled in my chest as the truth landed: our time together was drawing to a close. Still, I clung to the moment, unwilling to let it pass before it had fully lived its course.

Kalindi looked at me, her eyes softening as she whispered, "Thank you."

The train began to move—slow, steady—and I took a step back, watching her board with Udai beside her. Tears gathered in my eyes, a quiet blend of happiness and ache. I had been a constant in Kalindi's life, and now, I stood at the edge as she stepped into a new beginning. Letting go wasn't easy—it never is—but in that moment, it carried a quiet sense of peace. It was time.

As the train picked up speed, I waved, my heart full but heavy, knowing that I would always be there for her, no matter where life took her. She was my sister, my confidante, my everything, and now she had someone else to share her life with. And that was okay.

After returning home, my mind still buzzing with the warmth of the meeting with Kalindi and her love, I met with Harleen. As we sat together, our usual spot, I told her everything. She listened intently, her eyes reflecting the same happiness I felt. Her smile was genuine, her admiration for Kalindi and the bond we shared obvious. Harleen had a way of making everything feel lighter, like the burdens of the world could disappear in her presence.

We often spent our weekends together, especially on Saturdays when we would arrive half an hour early for class. Those moments, sitting alone before the others arrived, were sacred. We'd chat endlessly, sharing our thoughts, our dreams, the small details of our lives that seemed so insignificant yet meant everything to us.

Despite her teasing me once about liking her, neither of us had yet spoken those three words aloud. There was no rush, no need to define it yet. We both knew what was there, even

if unspoken. Perhaps we were saving it for a moment that felt truly special.

With Harleen, life grew brighter. Her presence brought a warmth and calm I had never known—a quiet, grounding joy that reshaped everything around me. For the first time, happiness felt real, steady, earned.

And yet, just beyond that light, a shadow lingered—always near, watching. Something unspoken pressed against the edges of this peace, a silent tension rising, as destiny itself pushed back against the life I was beginning to build.

Somewhere high above, I felt the gaze of those unseen forces sharpening, their attention focused on me. My life was unfolding like any other ordinary person's, filled with love and happiness, but I knew—deep down—that I wasn't sent here for this. There was a greater plan, and I had been disrupting it, unknowingly or not.

I hadn't told Harleen about any of this. The strange visions, the visits from the Matrikas, the mystical encounters—I kept them hidden, fearing she would think I had lost my mind. I didn't want to risk losing her, not when she had brought such joy and balance to my life.

Nature responded when we were together—the wind carried whispers meant only for us, and the world softened around her presence. The air turned light, laced with a quiet current of romance. Time paused, stretching each second, unwilling to let go of what we shared.

But beneath that stillness, a truth stirred. This peace wasn't meant to stay. Something greater loomed on the horizon, and it was coming straight for me.

Two days later, I found myself sitting alone on the roof, the evening sky draped in hues of deep purple and fading orange. The sun had just set, and the stars were beginning to peek through the thick, velvety darkness of the night. The air was cool, a light breeze brushing against my skin, carrying with it the scent of the earth, damp from the afternoon heat.

Suddenly, I felt a shift. A presence.

Before I could react, she appeared again—another Matrika. But this one was different. She was older, more mature, her beauty radiant yet commanding. She was not like the others. Her presence was calm, controlled, but there was a depth to her, a sense of wisdom and power that made my heart race.

She hovered before me, untouched by gravity, suspended in silence and starlight. Her deep violet attire clung to her form, the fabric fusing with her skin in a shimmer that caught every flicker of light.

Her figure was sculpted with divine precision, every movement fluid, effortless—gliding through the air with the grace of something not bound by the laws of this world.

She smiled, but there was no comfort in it. Something veiled lingered behind the curve of her lips—quiet, disquieting. Her eyes locked onto mine, and in that instant, I wasn't just being seen. I was being known—stripped down to something deeper, something beyond what I could name or grasp.

"You are special," she said, her voice soft yet resonant, each word pulsing through the air, shaping the space around us with quiet force.

I said nothing. I didn't believe her—not in the way she meant. Still, she held a gravity that pulled every thought toward her. She moved in silence, and before I could react, she stood at my side. Her breath grazed my ear—cool and cutting, a sudden contrast against my skin, carrying the edge of a winter wind.

"You are protected," she whispered, her voice slipping past sound and into thought. The words didn't just reach me—they moved through me, stirring something buried, something long dormant, now rising to the surface.

I looked up at her, my thoughts in chaos. Her movements were fluid, each motion effortless as she drifted through the air, the atmosphere responding to her presence.

Her violet robes shimmered, catching the faint evening light and casting a glow that didn't belong to this world. Her hair flowed behind her—dark, silken, framing her face with a quiet elegance—as she hovered just above the ground, suspended in a moment that defied reason.

"Still, you disregard the blessing," she said again, her tone sharper now, more accusing. I could feel my heart begin to race, my palms clammy. Something wasn't right. I had seen her before—in the shadows, the mirror reflection on that day when I had first gone searching for Harleen.

This was a warning, and I could sense it. Destiny was shifting, pulling me away from the happiness I had found, and I didn't like where it was heading.

"You are the master," she said, her voice gliding through the air—circling me, shifting from one side to the other, never settling, always in motion.

"You are the follower." Her words were contradictory, yet they held an eerie truth.

I remained silent, listening, my breath shallow. The air around us grew colder, the night thickening as she spoke.

"Still, you endure pain," she said, her tone softening—almost tender—but there was an edge to it, a quiet cruelty that pressed deeper with every word.

"No love, no attachment for the master," she added, her words cutting through me. "He will live alone."

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. Alone. That word echoed in my mind, a weight settling on my chest. The love I had found, the happiness with Harleen, it was not meant for me, was it? This was my fate, to be alone, to walk this path without her.

"Be a father of one or a father of all," she whispered in conclusion, her words filling the space around me, heavy with meaning. And then, just like that, she was gone. Vanished into the night, her form dissipating into a cloud of dark mist, leaving behind only the cold wind and the unsettling weight of her words.

I sat there, frozen, staring into the night sky. The stars twinkled above, indifferent to the turmoil brewing inside me. What did it all mean? Has the plan changed? Had I disrupted the path I was meant to walk? Each time the Matrikas appeared, they left me more confused, more uncertain about my future.

I was missing something, something crucial, and the pieces weren't aligning. Was this a warning? Had I gone too far off course?

Questions churned through my mind as I climbed down from the roof, each step heavier than the last, burdened by the weight of what had just unfolded. I moved through the silence, torn between two worlds—one filled with love, warmth, and human connection; the other cold, distant, bound to a path shaped by duty and fate.

I came down to dinner, ate in silence, and retreated to my room, my mind still spinning. The night felt heavier, the air thick with uncertainty as I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Sleep was far from my grasp, and the words of the Matrika echoed in my mind.

Alone. Was that truly my fate? With that unsettling thought hanging heavy over me, I somehow drifted into a restless sleep. The morning came like any other but for me, it was a continuation of the weight I had been carrying. The burden of feeling torn between two worlds, the real and the mystical, was crushing. I was no longer sure which world I truly belonged to.

A few days passed in a blur of routine, but then I received the news that Kalindi would be visiting with Mumma and Papa. The moment I heard it, my heart swelled with happiness.

I missed her deeply, and the thought of her being here, with me, filled me with joy. I began to make plans—how we would spend our time together, the stories we would share, and most importantly, I wanted her to meet Harleen.

When the day arrived and Kalindi finally stood in front of me, everything felt lighter. Her presence was a balm, soothing the worries that had plagued me. We sat together, talking like we always did, laughing over small things, and sharing thoughts without restraint. She was my confidante, the person I trusted most, and with her, everything felt right.

But then, something strange stirred within me. As we were sitting there, our conversation flowing, a sudden chill crept over me. Out of nowhere, the dream of hell—that nightmarish vision—flashed before my eyes. The memory of it hit me like a punch to the gut, sending a wave of cold dread through my body. The fear of losing Kalindi gripped me tightly, the universe was warning me that something was coming.

I didn't know what was about to happen or why this fear was so overwhelming, but I couldn't shake it. In that moment of panic, I made a decision. "Sis," I said, my voice trembling slightly, "come with me to the roof."

She looked at me, confused but trusting, and followed without question. We climbed the stairs in silence, the warmth of the late afternoon sun beating down on us. The heat was stifling, beads of sweat forming on both of our foreheads as we reached the roof. The sky above was a bright blue, the sun relentless, but despite the warmth, I felt cold inside.

"Sit here," I told her, guiding her to a spot where the sun could reach us fully. I needed the light, needed the energy for what I was about to do.

Kalindi sat cross-legged on the ground, her eyes on me, trusting but uncertain. I took my place opposite her, sitting in

the same position, my heart racing with a mix of fear and determination. “Close your eyes,” I instructed her softly, “and place your hands in front of you, palms up.” She did as I said, and then I placed my hands above hers, palms down, not quite touching, but close enough to feel the faint warmth radiating from her skin.

I didn’t know exactly what I was doing. Something inside me had taken over, a force beyond my understanding. It was driving me, pushing me to act, even though I wasn’t fully aware of how or why.

I began to transfer my energy to her—silently, without a word. It poured out of me, flowing through my hands in an unseen current. The sensation was unfamiliar, a quiet depletion; my very essence being drawn away, thread by thread.

I didn’t know where this power came from, but I knew why I was doing it. I needed to protect her. The vision of hell, the fear of losing her—it all came rushing back as I sat there, silently pouring my strength into her.

Half of my energy, maybe more, was flowing into her, creating a barrier, a shield. I couldn’t tell her why. She was so happy, so full of life, and I didn’t want to burden her with my fears. This was my way of protecting her, of ensuring that she would be safe, even if I couldn’t always be there.

As the energy left my body, weakness crept in. My limbs turned sluggish, my vision dimmed. Each breath grew thinner, drained by something deep within. Kalindi’s eyelids fluttered, her face peaceful, unaware of the silent exchange taking place.

Her body remained still, yet something in her shifted—I could sense it.

I was giving her a part of myself, weaving a shield around her—quiet, invisible—a protection she would carry without ever knowing it was there.

After what felt like an eternity, she opened her eyes. Her gaze was soft, but curious.

“I feel... different,” she said, her voice light but full of wonder. “I feel energized.”

I forced a smile, masking the exhaustion that was creeping over me. “You were looking a bit tired, so I gave you some of my energy,” I replied, keeping my voice steady. I couldn’t let her know what I had truly done. If she knew, she might grow too comfortable, too reliant on the protection I had given her, and I didn’t want her to misuse it. She needed to stay grounded.

As I slowly regained my strength, I felt it before I saw them—the three Matrikas. They were standing in the distance, their figures hazy but unmistakable. For the first time, I saw them all together, and the sight sent a shiver down my spine.

The first, wrapped in black, stood on the left, her expression unreadable. She was the one I had met first, the one who had appeared in my life like a shadow. On the right was the second Matrika, the one who had appeared in deep violet, her eyes sharp and focused. And in the center stood the third Matrika—someone I had never seen before. She was wrapped in a black so unique it almost shifted in the light, a black with a touch of brown, like the earth after a heavy rain.

Her presence was formidable, her aura commanding. She was clearly their leader.

Their faces were blank, but their eyes spoke volumes. They were watching me, judging me. I had done something wrong, something they had been trying to prevent. Their gazes were sharp, piercing through me like daggers. They weren't here to offer guidance this time. No, they were here because I had disrupted something—a balance, a plan, a destiny.

I had done something out of love, something that felt right in the moment, but I hadn't realized the cost. The Matrikas vanished as quickly as they had appeared, their forms dissolving into the air like mist, leaving behind an atmosphere so thick with tension that I could barely breathe.

I sat in silence, eyes fixed on the space where they had once stood. The sky darkened above, the air thickened around me. Something in the world had shifted—subtle, but absolute. My actions had stirred forces beyond reach, and now, the path ahead had changed. There was no return.

Kalindi was still smiling, unaware of what had just transpired, but I could feel it. I had done something profound, something that had shaken the very roots of my existence. And now, all I could do was wait and see what would come of it.

As I walked downstairs with Kalindi, I tried my best to act normal. I forced a smile, engaged in small talk, and did everything I could to hide the storm raging inside me. But inside, I was reeling.

My love for her, my fierce desire to protect her, had led me down this path. I had done something irreversible, something that shook the very foundation of my reality.

The universe was watching. The weight of that realization pressed down on me like an invisible hand, heavy and suffocating. I had unknowingly changed everything. Sis, with Mumma and Papa, left for Aunt Damayanti's house.

That night, as I lay in bed, the weight of my actions pressed deeper into my chest, tightening with every breath. The air had changed—dense, unmoving—the room holding its breath in silence. For the first time in what felt like ages, a quiet fear began to stir. It had no name, no shape, but it clung to me, impossible to ignore.

At some point, exhaustion overtook me, and I drifted into sleep. But this was no ordinary sleep.

When I opened my eyes, the world around me had changed. It was dark, the kind of impenetrable blackness that swallows everything. Yet, from a single point in the distance, a faint light emerged, flickering like a distant star, casting weak beams through the void. Stars began to shower down, glittering like sparks, illuminating the darkness with a strange, otherworldly glow.

I knew this place. I had been here before—when I was just six years old. It was the place that changed everything. The place where my journey began, where I first understood that I was not like everyone else. But this time, it was different.

There was no warmth here, no sense of wonder. Only a deep, suffocating silence that pressed against my skin. I felt

the coldness seep into my bones. This was not a place of discovery; it was a place of reckoning.

Suddenly, a voice echoed from the light—not a gentle whisper, but a stern, accusing tone that cut through the silence like a blade. It wasn't just speaking to me—it was speaking *about* me.

"You were the master," the voice boomed, cold and unforgiving. "But you became the follower of your belief."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I had been the master of my fate, of my powers, but somewhere along the way, I had surrendered. I had let my feelings, my attachments, guide me instead of the purpose I was born with.

"You were the special one, but you risked everything."

With every word, the weight of my actions became clearer. I could feel the truth of it wrapping around me like chains, pulling me down. I wanted to speak, to explain myself, but the voice continued, relentless.

"Faith is lost. Trust is lost. Hope is lost."

"The future is dark, and trouble awaits you."

"The earth will burn, and the sky will pour dark waters."

The words echoed in my mind, growing louder, more intense. I could feel the fear rising within me, like a flood threatening to drown me. My breath quickened. What had I done? What chaos had I unleashed on the world, on the people I loved?

"They will seek help but will lose, as the master is now the follower."

"Leave for what you have done, never done before."

My heart raced. The ground beneath me shifted, and I felt myself teetering on the edge of something vast and terrible. Was I truly the cause of all this? Was the dark future they described my doing?

My mind spiraled. The stars above dimmed, their light flickering out one by one, leaving only the voice to fill the empty void. My entire existence was being unraveled, thread by thread, and I couldn't stop it. I was suffocating beneath the weight of the accusations, the warnings, the terrifying certainty that I had done something that could not be undone.

Before I could even respond, before I could speak a word in my defense, the voice delivered its final, crushing blow:

"Live the curse and burn till forgiven."

My stomach lurched—the ground vanished beneath me. In an instant, I was falling, tumbling into a boundless abyss. The stars above faded into the distance, shrinking into cold, unreachable points of light as I plunged deeper into the void. Darkness closed in from all sides, swallowing me whole. The weight of it pressed against my skin—cold, silent, crushing—dragging me further from everything I had ever known.

The fear was paralyzing, a terror unlike anything I had ever known. The light was gone now, completely out of reach, and all that surrounded me was endless, crushing blackness.

I fell for what felt like an eternity, the wind howling in my ears, my body weightless yet filled with a deep, gnawing pain. And then, with a sudden jolt, I hit something solid.

I opened my eyes, gasping for breath, heart pounding, body soaked in sweat. But something was wrong—deeply wrong. I hadn’t just woken up; I had landed. My body had struck the bed with force, leaving a dent in the mattress and a sharp ache running down my spine. It felt real—a fall that had carved itself into my muscles and bones. Every inch of me throbbed with the memory of something I couldn’t explain.

Pain rippled through my body—real, tangible pain. I was no longer the same. My connection to the mystical world felt severed. The powers that had once been a part of me were gone, vanished like smoke, leaving behind only the dull ache of loss. I was... normal.

My mind raced, frantically trying to recall the details of the vision. But they were slipping away, like sand through my fingers. I could remember only fragments, fleeting glimpses of the warnings I had received. The curse. The burning. The fall.

I lay there, staring at the ceiling, my body aching, my mind blank. Had I truly lost it all? Was I cursed now? I could feel the emptiness where my powers had once been—a hollow void, echoing with the distant memory of what I had once been.

I had risked everything, and now, I was paying the price.

I could barely remember the details of my past—only fragments remained, vivid impressions that shaped who I had been. But the rest was a blur, lost in the dark void that had swallowed me whole. I was cursed, thrown into a world of pain, doomed to burn until I was forgiven.

But would I ever be forgiven?

As the night stretched on, the silence of my room felt heavier than ever. The universe had turned its back on me, and now I was alone, truly alone, in a way I had never imagined. The weight of the curse pressed down on me, and for the first time in my life, I felt truly powerless.

And that, more than anything, terrified me.

Chapter 12

The Downfall

When I woke up the next morning, the air felt heavier, thick with an impending sense of doom. I could sense that the curse had already begun to take its form. Something was terribly wrong.

Before I could even gather my thoughts, my father stormed into the room, his face twisted with rage. Without warning, he grabbed me by the throat, his fingers digging into my skin, choking me.

“What have you done to Kalindi?” he shouted, his voice laced with fury, her name burning on his tongue. I gasped, desperate for air, clawing at his grip, my thoughts scattering in every direction. The world narrowed—tight, suffocating. I couldn’t breathe.

“Leave him! He’ll die!” My mother’s voice cut through the chaos as she tried to pull my father away. Her hands were frantic, tugging at his arms, desperate to stop him from squeezing the life out of me.

I coughed violently as his hands finally loosened, air flooding back into my lungs. My vision blurred for a moment as I stumbled back, trying to regain my balance. What was happening?

“What... What happened to my sister?” I asked through labored breaths, still coughing as I tried to piece together the fragments of this nightmare.

“Sister?” my father spat, his eyes blazing with fury. “You still have the guts to call her that?” He stared at me—cold, distant—the warmth we once shared already buried beneath his rage.

“What happened?” I repeated, fear gripping my heart. The thought of losing her, the person I loved most in the world, gnawed at me with every passing second.

“She’s been shivering since she arrived at your aunt’s house,” he shouted, “and Sumitra Bhabhi says there’s something going on between you two. She saw you on the roof together yesterday.”

“What?” I stammered, my mind unable to process his words. How could anyone think that? All I had done was out of love, out of protection for my sister, and now... now I was being accused of something unspeakable.

“What is this, heaven?” I whispered to myself in despair, my thoughts spiraling. “Is this how you repay me? Burn me for loving the ones I cherish most?”

“Let me see her!” I shouted, my voice raw with desperation. I had to see her, to know she was okay, to understand what had gone so horribly wrong.

Without waiting for anyone's response, I grabbed my scooter keys and dashed outside, ignoring my mother's frantic calls. The wind whipped against my face as I sped toward Aunt Damayanti's house, my mind racing faster than the wheels beneath me. It was only a thirty-minute ride, but every second felt like an eternity.

By the time I arrived, the atmosphere had turned heavy and hostile. My mumma, Sumitra, stood rigid, her face carved with fury. My papa's glare cut through me—sharp, accusing—his eyes branding me with the weight of an unforgivable crime.

"What have you done?" my mumma screamed, her voice laced with pain and disbelief. "What happened, Mumma? Where is Sis?" I asked, my fear bubbling to the surface, choking me from the inside out. I needed to see her, to fix whatever was broken, but the intensity of their anger had me frozen.

"She's not your sister anymore!" my mumma shouted, her words stabbing me like daggers. "What were you two doing on the roof? Damayanti was right! How could you even think of doing this in your own home?"

My mind reeled. This couldn't be happening. This humiliation, this shame—it was beyond imagination. Everything I had done on the roof was out of love, out of a desire to protect her, and now... now I was being accused of something unthinkable.

"Mumma, please," I begged, "you're my mother, please listen to me!" My voice cracked, but before I could say

anything more, Uncle stepped forward and slapped me across the face, hard enough to send me stumbling back.

“You’re our blood,” he spat, “otherwise, we would have killed you right here.”

I blinked, stunned, my face burning from the slap, my heart shattered by his words.

Sumitra turned to Damayanti, her face twisted with disgust. “Damayanti, you were right all along,” she said, her voice dripping with bitterness. “They were always on the phone, constantly talking. Only God knows what was going on between them. I regret the day I ever treated him like my own child, even more than my own daughter, Kalindi.”

The door slammed shut in my face with a loud, final thud, leaving me standing there in the dust. I was pushed out—discarded like I was nothing. The accusation was suffocating me. What had I done to deserve this?

Aunt Damayanti had poisoned their minds, twisting the truth until it was unrecognizable. But what had she seen? How could they believe such a thing about me and Kalindi? Was this the curse taking its form, or was it something even darker, something deeper?

With my mind swirling in confusion, I mounted my scooter and began the ride home, my chest tight with panic. The world felt wrong—everything was unraveling too quickly, and I couldn’t keep up.

When I reached home, my father was standing at the gate, his face still contorted with rage. He didn’t say a word, just stormed toward me. Before I could react, he kicked the

scooter, sending it careening toward a nearby pole. I crashed into it, the metal biting into my skin as I hit the ground hard.

Pain shot through my body, but before I could even cry out, my mother rushed to my side, helping me up with trembling hands. “He’s angry,” she whispered, “but you know he doesn’t mean it.”

I nodded weakly, but inside, I felt completely broken. Everything had collapsed in a matter of hours. The family I had once held so dear was now shattered into pieces, and I stood among the wreckage, powerless to stop it.

The most important person in my life, my lifeline, was gone. I could feel it in my bones. The bond between me and Kalindi had been severed, and nothing would ever be the same again.

I sat down heavily on a nearby chair, my mind racing, trying to piece together what had gone so terribly wrong. Everything had unraveled so quickly. As I stared blankly ahead, I tried to reconnect the dots, to make sense of the chaos that had turned my life upside down.

Aunt Damayanti... her name lingered bitterly on my tongue. I had never realized how deeply she was scheming, how her thirst for status and control had grown to the point where she was willing to destroy anyone in her way. She had always wanted to climb higher in the family’s hierarchy, and now she had a son—a son who cemented her place, while I stood as the last obstacle.

And then there was Kalindi’s secret—her love, the one person she trusted enough to share her heart with. Kalindi had confided in me about her feelings for him, and I kept her

secret safe, never revealing it to anyone. But now, Aunt Damayanti had overheard her talking, and she had twisted it into something ugly. I wasn't sure if anyone else knew the truth, but Damayanti... she had crafted a story that painted me as the villain. She fed the poison into the minds of everyone around me, and they had eaten it up without question.

I was the perfect target—everyone knew how close my sis and I were, how strong our bond was. And now, with their minds poisoned against me, the pieces had fallen perfectly into place for Damayanti. The evil forces had gathered around her, like vultures, circling, waiting for their moment to strike. They were ready to burn me, to tear me down, and punish me for something I never even thought possible. I had been thrown from the heavens, and this was my fall.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms as I tried to make sense of it all. What had Aunt Sumitra seen on the roof? Was it some illusion, some trick of the Matrikas? Had they played a role in all this, fueling the seeds of poison that were now suffocating me? I couldn't understand how things had spiraled so quickly, but deep down, I knew one thing: if I spoke the truth, no one would listen. Not this time. The damage had already been done.

And worst of all, if I tried to clear my name, it would risk Kalindi's reputation. She could lose everything—her love, her chance at happiness, her future. I couldn't do that to her. I would never forgive myself if I ruined her life to save my own.

“What have I done?” I whispered, the words barely escaping my throat. “All I ever wanted was to protect her... to keep her safe.”

But now I knew—I had to live with this curse. The words echoed in my mind, haunting me: “Burn till forgiven.” There was no escaping it. I had to pay the price for what I did, for the love I had tried to give. And I had to do it alone.

I dropped my head into my hands, feeling the weight of it all pressing down on me. There was no way out. My only hope now was that Kalindi would be safe. That she would find happiness, even if it meant sacrificing myself.

I prayed silently, my thoughts drifting to my creator. “Bless them,” I begged. “Bless them all. If I have to burn, let it be me alone.” I could feel the tears welling up, but I held them back. “I’ll take this curse, I’ll take this pain, but let them be free. Let my sister live in peace.”

A deep breath shuddered out of me. The pain of the curse, the unbearable weight of it, was something I could live with. But losing my sister’s love... that tore me apart.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I whispered to myself, vowing in that moment to carry this burden in silence. “I won’t speak the truth. Not now.” I had to wait. I had to let time pass, let the curse burn itself out. Maybe someday, when I am forgiven, when this curse is lifted, only then would I speak. Only then would I make my truth known.

For now, I had to endure. I had to burn.

My mind drifted to Kalindi. I could feel her pain, her confusion. Maybe she was suffering as much as I was. Maybe

she knew, deep down, that if she told the truth, everything would collapse around her. She had to stay silent, just as I had to. We were both prisoners of this fate, both caught in the same web of lies and deceit.

“If this is what destiny demands, then so be it,” I thought, “Let me be the sacrifice. Let me burn for her happiness.”

But then, a darker thought crept into my mind. What about Rudra? What about Harleen? The only two people left who mattered to me in this broken world. Would I lose them too? Was that what this curse would demand? Was I destined to be truly alone, to lose everyone I loved?

I shook my head, trying to push the thought away, but it lingered. The fear gnawed at me. Was this the beginning of my complete downfall?

I sat there, lost in my thoughts, the weight of the curse pressing down on me like a heavy stone. I had always known I was the chosen one, but now... now I was the cursed one. And no matter how much I wished to undo it all, there was no turning back.

“I am the chosen one,” I whispered, the words catching in my throat, “But now I am cursed.”

Two days later, the next blow came. We received the news that my grandfather had passed away. It felt like the universe had decided to strip me of everything in one cruel sweep. The dream, that hellish vision that had haunted me, was now becoming my reality. I couldn’t recall every detail of it, but the larger picture was painfully clear. Everything was unfolding just as I had feared.

When we arrived for the funeral, all eyes turned toward me. I could feel their stares, heavy with suspicion, disgust, and judgment. It was as though every gaze pierced through me, their silent accusations ringing louder than words ever could. To them, I was already guilty.

I was the criminal in their eyes, the traitor to the family. I was the one responsible for the darkness that had crept into our home. Aunt Damayanti had played her role masterfully, her whispers and lies spreading like wildfire through the family. She had planted seeds of doubt and now, they had blossomed into full-blown accusations.

I stood there, surrounded by the faces of people I had loved all my life, people who had once looked at me with affection, and now they saw a monster. I realized then that I was utterly alone. I had lost everything in the blink of an eye—my family, my respect, my place among them. No one would listen to me. No one would believe me.

When we returned home from the funeral, the atmosphere was thick with grief and tension. Mai-sa, my grandmother, was not well. She was shaken to her core by the news of my grandfather's death. I had never seen her so broken. The strongest woman I had ever known was now reduced to tears, sobbing uncontrollably. She fainted repeatedly, her frail body unable to withstand the weight of her sorrow.

I stood in the corner, watching her fall apart, feeling helpless. I couldn't do anything to ease her pain, and it tore me apart inside. I wanted to comfort her, to tell her that everything would be okay, but the words were stuck in my

throat. She was the pillar of our family, and now, even she was crumbling.

As I sat in silence, the door to my room creaked open, and Neelima Kaki, one of the oldest maids in our household, stepped inside. She had been with us for as long as I could remember, always taking care of my mother and watching over us when we were younger.

“Kunwar ji,” she said softly, her voice laced with hesitation. “Is it true?”

“What is true, Neelima Kaki?” I asked, lifting my head to meet her eyes. There was something in her gaze that made my stomach twist—a sadness, but also a doubt that stung deeper than any accusation.

“I heard... I heard that you misbehaved with your sister, Kalindi,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Damayanti was telling your aunts that you were thrown out of her house for...” She hesitated, as though the very words pained her. “...for misbehaving with your sister.”

The air felt heavy around us, thick with the weight of her question. For a moment, I was frozen, unable to comprehend that even someone like Kaki, who had known me my whole life, was asking me this.

“Why do you have to ask me this, Kaki?” I managed to say, my voice strained. I couldn’t hide the hurt that laced my words. She was like family, and hearing her doubt me—even a little—was a blow I hadn’t expected.

She lowered her eyes, wringing her hands together. “The other maids... the servants...” she began, but her voice trailed

off. “They’ve been talking. We’ve heard things, and... we don’t want to believe them, but...” She stopped again, unable to meet my gaze.

I felt a knot tighten in my chest. Even they were doubting me now. The people who had watched me grow up, who had cradled me in their arms as a child—they were beginning to wonder if the whispers were true.

“You were drunk, they said,” she added, her voice barely audible now. “Is it true?”

I looked at her, searching her face for some sign that she still believed in me. “Kaki,” I said softly, trying to keep my voice steady, “What do you think?” I asked, a desperate need for reassurance swelling within me. “Do you believe this? Do you believe I could do something like this?”

She looked up, her eyes brimming with tears, and in that moment, I saw it—the struggle within her. She didn’t want to believe it, but the doubt had crept in. Even in her heart, a seed had been planted.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “No, Kunwar ji. We don’t believe any of it. You were cradled in our arms. We’ve seen you grow—we’ve always known you were different.” Her voice trembled. She hesitated, the weight of doubt pressing against her own conviction. “But Damayanti... she’s behind this. She’s the one spreading these stories. She wants to tarnish your name.”

The silence between us deepened, growing thick and suffocating. I wanted to speak, to defend myself, but the words wouldn’t come. What could I say that would change their

minds? Even those who had raised me were beginning to question me. Damayanti had poisoned them all.

I nodded slowly, unable to meet her eyes. We both knew what this meant—the doubt was there, even if it was buried deep inside her. And once doubt takes root, it grows, no matter how much you try to push it away.

We sat in silence for what felt like an eternity, the room filled with the weight of unspoken fears and unanswered questions. She knew the truth, somewhere deep down, but even she wasn't immune to the rumors.

I remained silent, my heart heavy, knowing that I had lost the faith of those who had once loved me. There was nothing more to say. The damage was done, and no matter what I said, it wouldn't change what people believed now.

As Neelima Kaki rose from the chair, she gave me one last look—a look filled with sadness—and then, without another word, she left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

I was alone again.

The silence in the room roared, crushing me from every direction. Even the air had turned dense, each breath a struggle beneath the weight of accusations I couldn't outrun.

Everyone was there—the whole family—yet the room felt more like a battlefield than a place of mourning. I caught a glimpse of Kalindi, standing silently among the others. Our eyes never met, but I knew she felt my presence, just as I felt hers.

We both understood the silent pact we had made—the unspoken truth we carried alone. We couldn't look at each

other, not because of guilt, but because we both knew the price we were paying to keep this secret hidden within ourselves.

But deep down, I was relieved. Just seeing her, knowing she was okay, was enough. There was no regret, no pain in my heart when I thought of her. She was mine, and she always would be, no matter what anyone thought or said. No one else understood, but she knew. She knew what I had sacrificed for her, and that was all that mattered.

She trusted me, fully and completely, and I would give my life before I ever betrayed that trust. One day, I promised myself, her faith in me would be restored. Time would change things, and the truth would eventually surface. But until then, I had to carry the weight of this burden, silently and alone.

Meanwhile, the house was transforming before my eyes. Aunt Damayanti's presence had seeped into every corner, twisting the thoughts of those around us. An invisible weight pressed down on everything—undeniable and thick.

The glances had changed: measured, cold. Whispers stirred the hallways whenever we walked past. Distrust clung to walls and voices, spreading through the household in a slow, silent decay.

The other aunts had grown distant, lost in their own worlds. They ignored us completely, their indifference cutting deeper than words. No one spared us a thought anymore. My mother... she bore the worst of it. She moved through the house unnoticed, a shadow among the living, spoken to only when necessary—treated no better than the help.

Whenever she stepped into the kitchen, the others would drift away, leaving behind only sharp glances steeped in quiet contempt.

I watched her from the shadows, saw the way their looks crushed her, the way she silently bore the humiliation. She would retreat to her room afterward, her eyes red from crying. She was carrying the weight of my shame—the shame of being my mother. And it was breaking her.

One night, I overheard my parents speaking in hushed tones behind their closed door. I stood frozen in the hallway, pressed against the wall, clinging to every word, each syllable landing with the weight of something I wasn't meant to hear—but couldn't afford to miss.

"What disgrace our son has brought upon us," my father said, his voice filled with a bitterness that cut deep. "What humiliation."

There was a pause. I imagined my mother, sitting there quietly. She believed in me. I knew she did, but she was caught in the middle of this storm just as much as I was.

"No," she replied softly, "I believe he hasn't done anything wrong."

Her voice was firm, but there was an edge of desperation to it. She was fighting for me, and it made my chest tighten.

"There's no smoke without fire, Devika," my father shot back, his voice sharper now. "Not everyone would say the same thing unless there's some truth to it. People don't make up things like this."

My heart sank. He believed the worst, just like everyone else. The shame he felt wasn't just about me—it was about him, about what this scandal had done to his reputation, to his standing in the family.

“But this could be a misunderstanding,” my mother insisted, her voice shaky but determined. “We should ask him. We should hear his side.”

“What would we ask?” my father's voice grew louder, angrier. “It's too disgusting to even think about. And do you really think he'll tell the truth? Would you believe him if he did?”

I pressed my back harder against the wall, my breath catching in my throat. I couldn't let them ask me, not now, not ever. How could I explain? How could I tell them the truth without shattering them completely?

If they asked me directly, I would be forced into silence. And that silence, that inability to defend myself, would only condemn me further. If I told them the truth, they would never believe me. And if I told them nothing, if I stayed silent, their doubts would turn to certainty. They would believe I was guilty.

I closed my eyes, my hands clenched into fists as I stood there, frozen, the walls of my world crumbling around me. I had no way out.

I thought of Kalindi, of the secret we were both keeping. If they questioned me, it would force everything into the open. Her reputation would be ruined, and she would lose everything—her love, her future, her chance at happiness. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't betray her trust.

No, I thought. It's better if they don't ask. It's better if I remain silent, bear this weight alone. I'll take the blame. I'll take it all, if it means Kalindi stays safe. I'll carry this curse, burn alone in this silent agony.

I felt the familiar sting of tears in the back of my eyes, but I fought them back. Crying wouldn't help now. I had to stay strong. For her. For my mother.

I swallowed hard, forcing down the lump in my throat. I couldn't break, not here, not now. I had to keep this secret buried, no matter how much it tore me apart.

I would endure the curse, suffer through the pain, if it meant they would be okay.

But the heaviness in my chest didn't ease. The weight of their words, of my father's disappointment, my mother's silent pain, pressed down on me, threatening to suffocate me.

I was alone in this battle, and every passing day, I could feel the walls closing in, trapping me deeper in this web of lies, this twisted nightmare that I couldn't escape.

A few days later, we returned to the city, and the moment we arrived, I couldn't shake the feeling of dread that had been building inside me. I hadn't been able to connect with Harleen for what felt like ages, and something inside me was screaming for answers. Where was she? Why hadn't I heard from her? I needed to see her, to know she was okay.

I went straight to the tuition class, hoping she would be there, waiting for me like before. But when I arrived, Mandeep was the only one there, sitting quietly in the corner. The moment she saw me, her eyes filled with tears. She had a

band wrapped tightly around her hand, and before I could say anything, she burst into sobs, her voice cracking as she shouted at me.

“Where have you been all these days?” she yelled, her words sharp and filled with pain. “Where were you, Rana?”

Her voice hit me like a slap, filled with a kind of suffering I couldn’t understand. Something was wrong—I could feel it in the air, in the way she looked at me, in the way her body trembled as she sobbed.

“Mandeep, what’s going on?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. “My grandfather passed away,” I added, pointing to the scarf I wore to cover my bald head from the rituals. But her eyes didn’t soften.

She collapsed onto her knees, shaking with sobs, and that’s when the fear really hit me.

“She’s gone,” she whispered, her words barely making it past her lips. “She’s gone, Rana. Gone forever.”

I froze, the blood draining from my face. Gone? Who? I knelt beside her, grabbing her shoulders, trying to steady her. My heart was pounding, a sick feeling rising in my chest.

“Who, Mandeep? Where is Harleen?” I asked, panic creeping into my voice. “What do you mean she’s gone?”

Mandeep’s sobbing grew louder as she looked at me, her eyes red and swollen. “Harleen... She’s gone, Rana. Gone forever.”

I stared at her, not understanding. “No,” I whispered, shaking my head. “No, she’s not gone. She might’ve gone to

her grandfather's house or... or somewhere urgent." I was grasping for explanations, trying to convince myself that there was some other reason for this.

But Mandeep's tears wouldn't stop. She shook her head violently, clutching my hands as she spoke. "You don't understand, Rana," she sobbed, "she loved you. But now... now you'll never be able to meet her again."

Her words hit me like a blow to the chest. I felt the air leave my lungs, the world around me blurring. Loved? Harleen loved me?

But the way she was crying... this wasn't about distance. It wasn't about someone leaving town.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice rising with panic. "Mandeep, what happened? Please tell me!" I was shaking her now, desperate for answers, for some kind of clarity in the fog of confusion.

Mandeep crumbled, her hands covering her face as she broke down completely. "She's dead, Rana," she sobbed, "She's dead! You'll never see her again! You two... you're separated forever."

The world stopped.

No.

No. No, no, no!

I stumbled backward, my mind refusing to process her words. Harleen... dead? That wasn't possible. It couldn't be true.

“No!” I shouted. “No, don’t say that! That’s not true! She’s hiding, isn’t she? You’re testing me... this has to be a joke!” My voice cracked as I spun around the room, eyes darting to every corner, desperate for a sign—any proof that she might suddenly appear and end this nightmare.

My hands trembled as I reached for the walls, knocking over chairs in my frantic search. “Where is she? Harleen! Where are you?” I shouted, my voice echoing in the empty classroom.

But she wasn’t there.

Mandeep grabbed me, pulling me back, tears streaming down her face. “Rana, stop,” she cried, “She’s gone. She’s really gone.”

I sank into the chair, every ounce of strength stripped from my limbs. A chill swept through me. Harleen... gone?

My mind couldn’t wrap around it. How could she be gone? How could she just... vanish from my life like that?

“Tell me,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “Mandeep... please, tell me what happened.”

Mandeep sat beside me, her face pale and her eyes swollen from crying. She looked like she had aged ten years in a matter of days. “It was an accident,” she said through her sobs. “She... she didn’t make it.”

The room spun around me, the words hitting me like knives, one after another. An accident? How could this happen? How could she be gone?

I tried to breathe, but the air felt too heavy, too thick. This can't be real, I thought. It can't be happening. But even as I tried to convince myself that this was a nightmare, something deep inside me knew the truth.

Harleen was gone.

The walls of the room began to close in, the air suffocating me. I clutched my chest, my heart pounding painfully. I had lost her. The one person who had brought light into my dark world was now forever out of my reach.

If I had my powers, I could've found her. I could have reached out into the unseen world, felt her presence, spoken to her one last time. But I had nothing now, not even the comfort of knowing she was somewhere out there, waiting for me.

I could feel the emptiness in me growing, a hollow space where she used to be. Mandeep's sobs filled the room, but I was numb to them. The world outside looked distant, like I was watching it all through a fog.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to rip the universe apart, to demand answers, to ask why... Why was this happening?

"I can't lose her," I whispered to myself, though the words were barely more than a breath. "Not like this."

But the truth hung heavy in the air, undeniable. I had lost her. Harleen was gone, and with her, a piece of me was gone too.

I felt Mandeep's hand on my shoulder, her touch a faint reminder that I was still here, still tethered to this world,

though I didn't want to be. I looked at her, my eyes empty, and she stared back, her own face twisted with grief.

"She's gone," she repeated, her voice breaking. "I'm so sorry, Rana."

"A few days back," she began, her voice trembling as she spoke, "Harleen and I were cycling in the morning. We were talking about you... about how much she loved you." She paused, her hands shaking as she wiped her eyes. "She couldn't stop talking about you, Rana. She was so happy. You were everything to her."

I stared at her, my mind numb, unable to process the weight of her words. How could Harleen be gone? How could someone so full of life, someone who had meant so much to me, just be... gone?

"We were joking," Mandeep continued, her voice cracking as she tried to keep going. "We made a bet. Harleen said that if you two were really meant to be together, we'd hear your name or see you in the next few minutes." She smiled sadly, the memory bringing her to the brink of tears again. "She said... she said if it happened, she'd propose to you right there and then."

My heart twisted painfully in my chest. That was so like her—playful, spontaneous, full of joy. But something in Mandeep's voice told me this memory wouldn't end the way it should.

"We started the timer," Mandeep whispered, her eyes staring blankly ahead. "And then, just like that... there you were." She choked on her words, tears streaming down her face again. "You rode by on your scooter, just like she said you

would. Harleen couldn't believe it... she was so happy, so sure that it was fate."

The world around me felt like it was closing in, each of her words pulling me further into a nightmare I couldn't escape.

"She was so excited, Rana," Mandeep sobbed. "She rushed to stop you... to tell you. She wanted to run after you, to propose right there. She called out your name, and she started riding toward you..." Her voice broke, the memory too painful for her to continue.

My heart pounded against my ribs, each breath sharp and shallow as I braced for the words I couldn't bear to hear. I wanted to stop her—to freeze the moment—because hearing the truth would make it real, and I wasn't ready for that.

"She didn't see the truck," Mandeep whispered, her voice barely audible now, each word like a dagger piercing my chest. "She was so lost in your dreams, calling your name... and then... the truck hit her."

No.

No, no, no.

"I was right behind her, Rana," Mandeep cried, her hands gripping mine tightly. "I tried to stop her, I tried to grab her bicycle... but it all happened so fast. The truck came out of nowhere, and it hit her from behind..."

Her words were blurring, fading in and out as my world spun violently. I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears, drowning out everything else. She was still talking, but I could hardly make sense of it.

“The truck’s tire... it crushed her, Rana. It crushed her... right in front of me.”

My heart stopped.

A wave of cold swept through me, emptying everything inside in a single breath. Harleen was gone. Dead. And it was my fault.

“I saw her die, Rana,” Mandeep’s voice shook with sobs, “I watched her... she didn’t even scream. It was over so fast. One second she was there, and the next... she was gone.”

The world collapsed.

I couldn’t breathe. Everything inside me shattered, the pieces falling away into the void. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t accept it. How could she be gone?

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head violently. “No, this isn’t true. This can’t be true. Mandeep... please, tell me this is some kind of nightmare. Please...” My voice cracked, the pain crushing me.

But Mandeep only shook her head, her tears never stopping. “She’s gone, Rana,” she said, her voice hollow. “She’s gone, and she’s never coming back.”

I felt like I was being buried alive, the weight of the curse I had sworn to carry now crushing me. I had thought I could bear it, that I could suffer in silence, but now... now I knew I couldn’t.

The pain was unbearable.

It was more than I had ever imagined. I had promised to burn for her, for Sis, for all of them. But this—this was a fire I

couldn't withstand. It was destroying me from the inside out, consuming everything I had left.

I dropped to my knees, clutching my head in my hands, sobbing uncontrollably. I had lost everything. Harleen was gone, taken from me in the cruelest way possible, just as we were about to be together.

"I didn't even get to say goodbye," I whispered, my voice hoarse, broken. "I didn't get to tell her... how much she meant to me... how much I loved her."

Mandeep knelt beside me, her hand resting on my shoulder, but I barely felt it. I was drowning in the weight of my grief, the weight of the curse I had thought I could carry. But I couldn't carry it. It was too much.

"This is the curse," I thought bitterly. "This is what I was meant to suffer." I had been foolish to think I could survive it. Foolish to think I could bear the pain.

It felt like a demon was standing over me, towering above me, pressing me into the ground with its massive weight. I could feel the earth closing in around me, suffocating me, burying me beneath the weight of my loss. I was crushed beneath it all—beneath the guilt, the grief, the agony.

"I'm sorry," Mandeep whispered, her voice distant, almost inaudible through my haze of pain. "I'm so sorry, Rana..."

But her words barely registered. All I could feel was the darkness consuming me, pulling me deeper into an abyss from which there was no escape.

I had lost her.

And now... I was truly alone.

I couldn't breathe. I had to see it for myself. Without thinking, without processing anything, I grabbed my scooter and sped off to Harleen's house. My mind was numb, my vision blurred, but my heart... my heart was pounding so fast it felt like it would tear through my chest. Everything around me was a blur, the road, the buildings, even the people passing by—they didn't matter.

I was a man possessed. A lover, desperate, willing to sacrifice anything just to see her again. I rang the bell with a trembling hand, my body barely able to hold itself up. The door creaked open, and a middle-aged man—Harleen's father—stood there. I didn't even look at him, my eyes searching for something—for her.

Without saying a word, I stepped inside, passing him like a ghost, my feet moving automatically, drawn by some invisible force. There were only a few old people inside the house, sitting quietly in the dimly lit room. Their eyes flickered toward me, but I couldn't register their presence. Their whispers were distant, like the soft rustling of leaves, barely reaching my ears.

I was moving in a trance, my entire being focused on one thing—finding her. The world around me blurred, and all that mattered was her.

And there she was. In the corner, framed in silence. Her photo smiled back at me—frozen in time, unchanged, waiting. A garland of marigolds draped around the frame, its bright yellow petals a cruel contrast to the storm rising inside me.

I froze, my breath catching in my throat. Her eyes, the ones that had once filled me with hope and joy, now stared at me through that cold frame. Her smile, the one that had been the light in my darkest moments, was now forever frozen in time.

I didn't move.

I just stood there, staring at her, unable to accept it. This couldn't be real. She couldn't be gone. I sat down slowly, my legs giving out beneath me, and all I could do was watch her, my eyes fixed on her face, praying—begging for this to be some twisted nightmare.

The room began to spin, the murmurs growing louder, but I didn't care. I was gone, lost in the moment, drowning in the realization that she was truly gone. My Harleen... the girl who had filled my life with love and hope, was now nothing more than a photograph in a frame.

The whispers around me grew, and I heard one of the older men approach me. He sat beside me, trying to console me, but his words were nothing more than distant echoes in a world that had gone silent.

I cried. I cried like I had never cried before. Tears poured down my face, uncontrollable, my chest heaving with sobs that shook my entire body. I couldn't stop. I didn't want to stop. She was gone, and there was nothing left for me now.

The old man put a hand on my shoulder, his voice gentle but empty. "Son... it's okay. Let it out." He was trying to comfort me, but he didn't know. None of them knew. They didn't understand why my heart was shattering into pieces.

And then Mandeep arrived, her face swollen from crying. She knelt beside me, placing her hand gently on my arm. "He was her friend," she told the others. "He just got back to the city today. He didn't know..."

The others nodded, but I could feel their eyes on me, judging, wondering why I was crying so hard for a girl they assumed was just a friend. But Mandeep knew. She understood. She knew I had loved Harleen more than anyone else in the world.

She helped me to my feet, but I was shaking, barely able to stand. My legs felt like they were made of stone, heavy and lifeless. I followed her outside, but I couldn't see where I was going. Tears blurred my vision, and all I could do was sob.

We sat on the stairs, Mandeep beside me, her hand resting on my arm. She didn't say anything. What was there to say? I cried into my hands, my shoulders trembling with the force of my grief. "Why?" I whispered, my voice hoarse and broken. "Why did this happen?"

But there was no answer. Only the sound of my sobs and the distant hum of the city, indifferent to the agony consuming me.

I stood up after what felt like hours, my body numb, my soul hollow. I couldn't stay there. I needed to be alone. I needed to scream, to cry out to the heavens for what they had taken from me.

I left Mandeep behind, barely able to make sense of my surroundings. I took my scooter and rode through the streets, not knowing where I was going, only that I needed to escape.

Eventually, I found myself at the hilltop near my house, the place I had always gone to find peace. But there was no peace here now.

I sat on the edge of the hill, staring out at the horizon as the sky began to darken. My body felt heavy, like it was sinking into the earth. I couldn't move, couldn't think.

"I need you, Sis," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "I need you now. I don't know what to do..." My heart ached, a deep, agonizing pain that spread through my chest, suffocating me.

"Harleen, please," I murmured, tears streaming down my face once more. "Please talk to me. Please... is there any way you can hear me? I need you." My voice cracked, and I buried my face in my hands, the weight of her loss crushing me.

The sky had grown darker now, and I could feel the storm coming. "Why did you leave me?" I cried, my voice breaking in the silence. "Why did you go?"

The wind picked up, and I shivered, feeling the coldness of the night settle into my bones. I had lost everything. My parents hated me. My family despised me. My sister... gone. My lover... gone. Even the Matrikas, my protectors, had abandoned me.

"I have no one," I whispered, my voice choked with grief. "No one is left."

And then, it started to rain.....to be continued.