

The Bond

A Story of Love, Care, and
Lifelong Connection

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

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7825-585-4

Cover design: Deepak Katheria
Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: May 2026

Dedicated
To My Grandson, Rhiddhit

Foreword



Ever since I first knew my grandmother - as a small child - I have always felt two things. First, that she is someone who feels deeply and loves with her whole heart. Second, whether through teaching, writing, or painting, she has a rare gift for weaving those emotions into everything she creates.

The Bond is no exception. After years of writing poetry and short stories cherished by thousands of readers, this novel marks my grandmother's first full-length work. Its characters, their relationships, and their varied perspectives reflect the richness of her lived experiences. In figures like Dipika, Satish, and Peter Vincent, I catch glimpses of her quiet strength and selfless nature.

At its core, this is a story about love in all its forms - romantic, maternal, selfless, and sacrificial. Above all, it is about the unbreakable bond between a mother and her child - one that no circumstance, distance, or danger can ever truly sever.

I am immensely proud of my grandmother for sharing her wisdom and her gift for storytelling with the world. I hope this book moves you as deeply as it has moved me.

Preface



I am most distressed to find that the present generation does not want to take care of their old parents who have given their utmost to bring them up. The most they do is to leave them in Old Age Homes, helpless and lonely. To add to my frustration as the nuclear family is the trend of the day, small children are in the care of 'childminders' who are callous and self-centred. This exposes the youngsters to untold risks. In my novel I tried to highlight the finer qualities of selfless love and true dedication.

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Chapter 1

Dipika's Family Background



Dipika looked at her frail mother, who had aged prematurely, with silvery greying hair, and wrinkled skin. This was the irrefutable evidence of the ravages which grinding hardship, and cruel trials of life, had inflicted on her young shoulders. She resembled a wilted rose petal, which had fallen uncared for, but despite the perversity of life, was able to give of herself, her intrinsic perfume. Her mother had had a busy morning of cooking and ‘cleaning-up’. Now she had reluctantly taken refuge in her soft, comforting bed, to ease the pain of her aging bones, which defiantly refused to conform to her dictates. In seconds she was overpowered with sleep, and a baby-like softness magnified the beauty of her age. Dipika looked at her mother with lingering tenderness.

The sound of her late father’s hacking cough would crash into her mind like thunderbolts. Dipika would wake her up from her sleep. It would strike her now with the same poignancy, as it did when a girl of three. Dipika would cling on to her mother’s dress, knowing something terrible was

happening, but not knowing what to do. That rasping, that wheezing, had forever left its traumatic impact on her mind. She later came to know that her father had died of lung cancer. Her mother had bravely carried on, and she admired her mother for that. After all the tough struggle, she was now disintegrating and falling apart, like an ancient fort, which had withstood the onslaughts of this heartless world all alone. Dipika wanted to give her a well-deserved respite from the core of her heart. She had a well-paying job, and she had resolved to top up her mother's life with all the happiness she could. Her heart welled up with love for her mother. But now she was in a hurry, because she had commitments which she had to honour.

Chapter 2

The Accident



Dipika still remembered the day of the accident. It had been her friend, Rakhi's birthday, and getting dark. She had promised to be at her house at five o'clock for the cake-cutting ceremony. She had taken half a day's leave, but she still could not make it on time. There had been so much to do even at home, as she tried not to leave the tough jobs on her mother's aging shoulders. Though she had bought a sky-blue chiffon saree to wear for the party, already late, she had quickly slipped into a skirt and blouse. But to look dressed up for the occasion, she had rummaged through her drawer, and taken out a lustrous milky white pearl string and worn it round her swan-like delicate neck. Then after appraising herself in the mirror, for a quick final touch, she had selected a pair of simple, matching pearl studs, equally becoming with its iridescent glow. She had looked at herself in the mirror and appraised her reflection appreciatively. Then she had stepped out with a light step, closing the door softly behind her, so as not to disturb her mother. When she had come to the auto-stand, she had got disheartened, seeing fifty people in the queue. It had wound up in a

serpentine formation, and seemed to move slowly, but every minute the line had been becoming longer. Her high spirit had been sucked out of her, like a full-blown balloon from which someone had squeezed the air out. She had waited and waited in the oppressive summer's heat. Dipika had watched with dismay, her freshly starched blouse becoming sodden with perspiration, and sticking to her body like a second skin. To add to her discomfort, though she had had a glass of water before leaving the house, her throat was parched, and she had felt an urgent need for another drink. She had heaved a sigh of relief, when she had been able to board the rickety, dilapidated auto-rickshaw, from which paint was scaling off in patches. But here also luck had been against her. As she had tried to get on to the vehicle, a sharp broken edge of the metal had torn off the side of her new immaculate steel grey jeans. It had hung like a dog's ear, when the culprit is ashamed of its deeds.

The two other occupants had been unduly obese. The lady had been middle-aged. But the way she had been dressed, did not suit her fleshy figure. She had been wearing a thin georgette sari, exposing an expanse of her abdomen. It had bulged in a grotesque manner, with the over-hanging hefty roll of flab, wobbling from side to side. Perhaps she had been under the impression that wearing a sleeve-less blouse was fashionable and chic, but her thick exposed arms had definitely not been a pleasant sight! They had almost resembled the under-side of a bloated toad! The gentleman with her, must have been her husband. He had worn a Dhoti and Pajama, but because of the humid, hot and clammy weather, he had also been drenched with his own perspiration, and off and on, he had blown air out of his mouth, in his effort to find some relief. Because of his proximity to Dipika, his wet kurta touching her body, had

made her feel downright nauseated. Somehow, she had managed to squeeze into the side corner of the back seat, clutching onto the iron bar at the side, so that she would not fall off. The steel frame of the auto-rickshaw had been cutting into her leg. But there had been no scope for moving to a more comfortable position.

She had been fascinated by the way the driver of the auto-rickshaw was weaving his way through the traffic. It had been rush-hour, as the office-goers had all been heading home. At one time it had seemed the auto-rickshaw would collide with a car, and at another, it had missed being hit by a speeding bus. Those on motor-bikes had wended their way anyhow, sometimes right to left, at other times, left to right, crisscrossing dangerously in front of them. The pot-bellied police man, had stopped a defiant motor biker in the middle of the road. The offender had flouted the traffic rules by having two pillion-riders without helmets. The pedestrians had also lacked patience. In sheer bravado, they would raise their hands imperiously to indicate they were crossing, and the onus had been on the driver not to run them over. There was chaos confounded! The cyclists had only added to the mayhem. Without having any protective gear, they had rushed through the disorderly traffic. The hawkers had woven their way between cars hoping to find some interested customers. Then the driver of a colossal school bus, after reaching the students to their destinations had been in a hurry to be over with his duties. He had started honking non-stop, as if all traffic had to make way for the bus to proceed. He had then turned on the head lamps with their blinding light. The auto-cycle had moved forward to make way for the bus. There had been another auto from the other side trying to negotiate through the narrow space as fast as he could.

Then it had happened in a flash.

Before she could realize what had taken place, she had been flung off like a missile from a launcher, and thrown on the hard pavement. She had lost her senses; her world had grown dark.

Chapter 3

The Beginning of the Journey Together



In the present, Dipika slowly opened her eyes. Her mind was all foggy. She looked around, taking in her surroundings. Her mind seemed to be unusually foggy. She had a faint memory of getting dressed up and going somewhere. Where was she? She was lying down on a semi-comfortable cot of sorts, covered with a white sheet. There were guardrails on either side of the bed. A cluster of tubes emerged from her hands and feet. It made her feel like a spider in a web. How did she arrive here? As she tried to focus her eyes on her unfathomable surrounding, a blurred image of someone standing came into view. Then she realized that the hazy figure was that of a nurse, who was flipping through what seemed to be a moth-eaten file. The rest of the room was in contrast - unnaturally pristine shiny metal surfaces and walls as white as well-processed eggshells. She tried to ask the Sister all the queries that came to her mind, but strangely, no sound came out from her voice. Dipika panicked—what had happened? Why could she not make herself heard? Fear gripped her like the tentacles of an octopus, and she wanted to scream! Had she

lost her voice! She tried to form words but she only opened and closed her mouth like a cod fish. It was after two, three attempts, she managed to get through to the nurse, that also when the nurse herself approached her. She told her to lie quietly as she was going to call the doctor. He had said that he wanted to check all her parameters without delay when she regained consciousness, as her condition had been critical. The nurse asked her over and over again whether she was able to comprehend what she was telling her. Dipika nodded her head in the affirmative.

The Doctor walked in almost immediately. He told her that he would run a few tests, but she had nothing to worry, as she was going to be fine. She had been admitted to the hospital with a head injury. Her condition had been critical. She had regained consciousness, that too for a short span of time, only after the doctors had pushed in life saving injections. She made an effort to sit up, but the nurse quickly came to her bed side, and stopped her from doing so. The Doctor informed her that he had prescribed a brain scan. As Dipika made an effort to move, a stinging pain went up her left arm and left her breathless. The nurse then told her that she had been brought to the room on a trolley, from the Emergency Ward, where they had done all that was necessary to stop the blood spurting out from the artery in the head. But the Doctors had warned that any strenuous movement on her part could start the bleeding again. She noticed that she was in a hospital robe. When she asked the Sister, who had got her admitted to the hospital, what the nurse said, made no sense to her. The description of the person did not fit into the jigsaw puzzle in her mind. She could not figure out, who could have been so kind to bring her to the hospital, because invariably there would be police complications, which everyone liked to avoid. The nurse

informed her that the stranger's name was Mr. Vincent. He was tall, and had a very pleasing personality. He could have been thirty-five or forty years of age, with a kindly appearance. His haircut was of the latest style, with the middle portion like a cock's comb. He had said that he would come again when it was the Visiting Hour. Dipika waited with bated anticipation for the Good Samaritan.

At five o'clock sharp, she heard somebody's footsteps at the door. They were measured deliberate steps. She turned her head with renewed curiosity, to see who the enigmatic person was. He approached her with a friendly smile. "So how is the Lady today?" Dipika's response was only a smile, which expressed the obvious. Every time she tried to sit up, she felt dizzy. She could not move one side of her body without feeling a wracking pain. But all these details she could not tell a stranger.

He drew up a chair next to her bed, and sat down. It seemed he had all the time for her. Then very leisurely, he went through all the details that had transpired on that eventful day. The driver of the Auto-rickshaw had been in a tremendous hurry to reach the passengers to their destination, because every trip would mean an added income. There had been a van in front of him which he overtook with ease, but in so doing, he had almost collided with the oncoming traffic. Then he had to overtake a minibus. He'd pressed the accelerator, the auto-rickshaw had swerved precariously and sped past the bus. A school bus had also added to the jam and had turned on his blinding headlight. Then Dipika's auto-rickshaw driver had lost control, and crashed into an auto-rickshaw coming from the opposite side. The driver and the other occupants of their auto-rickshaw had died on the spot. When Peter Vincent had seen that her life could be saved with timely care, and

treatment, he had picked her up, and rushed her to the hospital.

He looked deep into her eyes and asked her with a sheepish smile, “Tell me truthfully, did I do the right thing?” Dipika’s face turned a deep crimson with embarrassment as she realised that she was taking a favour from a complete stranger. She knew he must have spent a fabulous amount to get her admitted to the hospital. She knew she did not have much money in the bank, and wondered how she was going to pay him back. It seemed that he had read her mind, for he quickly added, “The expenses are entirely on me. As I had on my own volition brought you here, I take the responsibility of your treatment.” Dipika could only stutter and stammer in protest. He put an assuring hand on her arm and said comfortingly, “Don’t worry about anything, as now you are a patient, and I am looking after you.” Dipika’s heart welled up with gratitude.

Chapter 4

Peter Vincent Recounts



Peter, in a matter-of-fact way, explained that his action was nothing out of the way. He was the Managing Director of Dunlop Ltd, drawing a fabulous salary. As he was not married, he had no children. He did not have any brothers or sisters. His father had expired two years back. As he had no encumbrance for whom he had to provide, he was more than happy to be of some help to her.

Dipika admired his altruistic nature. He did not take any credit for his philanthropic work. He was so casual about it, as if it were nothing much even to mention. But in his life, there was a big cause of unhappiness - something which he could not disclose to anybody. On the other hand, it was draining out the peace and tranquillity of his mind, and was a constant load, which he could not shrug off, and like a cancerous growth, was sapping his innate vitality.

Peter was surprised at himself, how spontaneously he was pouring out his pent-up feelings to a complete stranger. He narrated how, after his Father's death, his mother had become a psychological case. She had become very

possessive, so much so that, with neither rhyme nor reason, it invariably seemed to her that he was not giving her the importance she deserved, and she would create a pandemonium. She would raise heaven and hell, and woe betide, if he did not do her bidding! Peter started rattling off all the irrational incidents of his difficult mother. What he had not divulged to anyone, he was now, without any inhibition, telling Dipika. Words were just gushing out like water bursting from a dam, which had been held in for a long time. It seemed that he had known her from childhood and he felt he could entrust her with his confidence. For the past months, he had bottled up all his traumatic experiences to himself, and felt suffocated.

His mother refused to consult a Psychiatrist, and she was becoming worse every day. He told Dipika in great detail how, in one instance on his birthday, he had invited some friends to his house for dinner. His mother had told him not to call a few people she did not like, but as they were his close friends and would mind if he did not invite them, he had included them in the party to avoid spoiling the relationship. As the last guest left, his mother had come out of her bedroom, like a lioness ready to pounce on its prey, and demanded an explanation for his not listening to her. Gradually her voice had become high-pitched, her body shaking with temper, like a palm tree in a tornado, and her eyes red, as if blood would spurt out any moment. He knew she was a blood-pressure patient, and any provocation could lead to a stroke. Flustered, he had done his best to pacify her. He had apologised over and over again and given her his word that he would never bring into the house friends whom she did not like. At last, after a never-ending hour, it seemed that he had been successful in dousing the raging

fire in her, but unfortunately, the residual scorching embers and ashes had remained.

If he went out to parties after office hours, she would complain that he did not love her, so he was neglecting her, and it would have been better if she had also died when his father did. What was the use of her spending her time all alone, in an abandoned, forsaken house? He would then have a difficult time, almost an impossible task, trying to cheer her up. She would lock herself up in her bedroom, and sob for hours. Then when she decided to open the door, her eyes would be swollen, her face puffy, and her blood pressure critical. He would then try to assuage her feelings by buying gifts for her, so that she felt loved, and coax her into agreeing to go out with him to a five-star restaurant.

To avoid any cause of friction, he had to invite his friends to his house, so that he would be able to come home straight from the office. His mother then could not complain, that he was neglecting her, by leaving her all alone in the house, whilst he was having a rollicking time outside. The only liquor she permitted him to buy was Beer, as she said, it contained the least percentage of alcohol. He abided by her instructions. Unfortunately, his friends, unaware of the restrictions, each bought whichever liquor they preferred. When the party was over, and the table was littered with glasses and bottles, his Mother came into the room, like a haughty headmistress, fuming and frothing, determined to mete out the just punishment to the recalcitrant students. All hell was let loose! How did Vodka, Gin, Rum and Whisky enter the house, when she had explicitly said, that only Beer could be bought? Peter tried to explain that his friends had brought the bottles, as they did not know that they were not supposed to. He himself had not gone against her wishes. But she burst into one of her hysterical fits. One

after the other, she pounced on the half-finished bottles, and smashed them on the floor with immense satisfaction. The room was filled with flowing liquor and broken glass. Not happy with her accomplishment, she surveyed the room, breathing heavily, then, like a hungry lioness, focusing her reddened eyes on the victims, she picked up the expensive glasses with relish and smashed them against the wall. Splinters and shards of glass flew across the room like sparks from a blazing fire, bearing testimony to her wrath. Having destroyed the last remnants of the party, she burst into tears, and collapsed on the floor. Her complaint was, that Peter did not care for her, as he had allowed his friends to drink the prohibited alcohol. Such was the situation in his family, where he was always tense and anxious, so as not to provoke his bereaved ailing mother. He empathized with her, and understood the void she was feeling, now that his father had expired. During his father's life time, both of them were so happy. Father used to take her on vacations, in and out of India. Every evening, they either relaxed in the Clubs, socialised with friends, or went out to see the latest movies. They also visited the five-star restaurants, and enjoyed international cuisine, as there was no dearth of money. On the other hand, Peter was young and also had a life of his own, which his Mother could not accept.

Dipika could only say, "I am sorry, you must be having a difficult time." But though her words were few, her heart went out to him, and she felt very close to him, as he had shared his very intimate thoughts with her. If she could only take away his hurt!

Chapter 5

Peter finds his Life- Partner



Peter wondered what had happened to him. It was such a strange and an alien experience. He was getting irritated as the girl who was packing up the gifts for him was taking too long. The traffic on the road was frustrating. Every second that he was getting delayed, was putting his blood pressure up. He had not even asked Dipika whether she was married or single. He only presumed that she did not have any one, as there were no visitors for her. Unless he found out, it was ridiculous to harbour such feelings! He had selected a set of dainty lace handkerchiefs in pastel colours. As he walked in, he found Dipika was sitting up in bed. Blushing crimson like a school boy, he presented the gift to her, mumbling something which was inaudible. She accepted it with a smile, and her face lit up when she saw what it was, as if the golden rays of the setting sun had fallen on an upturned delicate lily. Seeing her expression, Peter felt well rewarded, in the same way as a gardener would, seeing the first blossoms in his much-tended garden. When she asked him why he had brought the gift, he wanted to say that, because he was in love with her, but instead said that his eyes fell on

the handkerchiefs, and, as they were very pretty, he could not resist buying them. The time he spent with her seemed too short. He entertained her by telling her all the intimate, but graphic episodes of his life, and he made it his mission to find out everything about her.

Dipika too was confused at the rush of feelings for the Stranger, it was all so unexpected, all so consuming! She felt guilty. It was not right for her to get this surge of passion for Peter, when she and Satish had taken it for granted that they would get married when each started to earn. They had been childhood friends since school days. Their parents also took their marriage as a foregone conclusion. She loved him, it was true, but she had never experienced the electricity that went through her whole being when Peter looked straight into her eyes or accidentally touched her. It was as if they were just meant for each other. The handkerchiefs he had given seemed to be her precious possession, for even diamonds would not equate in value for her. She just happened to feel that way. She had no explanation for these unfamiliar feelings when she was practically engaged to another. She felt confused and angry with herself.

Peter's daily routine had now become visiting the hospital. Even before his office gave over, he would be in a rush to leave. Every two minutes, he would look at the watch, but time seemed to stand still. Before going to the hospital, he had to make many purchases. All women loved flowers, he presumed. He drove all the way to the Mall, especially to buy the most expensive perfume. He felt so handicapped, because to date, he did not know the colours she liked, the type of music she enjoyed, or what kind of books she was interested in. He made up his mind to find out all the details from her. He wondered why he wanted so much to make her

happy. Why did it matter whether the gifts were to her liking or not? He did not know himself anymore.

When Dipika was to be discharged from the hospital, Peter was there to drive her home. She had sent a message to Satish that she would be going home, and he had replied from Bombay that he had applied for leave and would be there to be with her in another two days. He had been very upset, hearing about her accident, and was going to take the earliest flight. Dipika was deluged with a feeling of guilt, but realised that, though she had not intentionally allowed herself to be obsessed with her feelings for Peter, she had to get control over herself right away. She looked at Peter's profile, sitting at the driver's seat, looking so handsome, with full concentration, absorbed in his task. Of and on, he would look at her and smile, commenting wittily on what he saw on the road, as the car sped past buildings, shops and people, busy with their lives. She wanted to tell him about Satish, as if that would lighten her overburdened conscience. Every time she tried to embrace the subject, he would give her his all-winning smile, and she would not be able to tell him. His smile was like a spell, which he cast on her, and she could not utter a word. When they reached her flat, he opened the door with her keys, so as not to disturb Dipika's ailing mother. As the lady heard somebody at the door, she came out, grasping the furniture. She looked frail, and unusually pale, like a wisp of cloud let loose, floating flimsily through the expanse of infinity. COVID had taken a toll on her health. She had been on her deathbed with pneumonia, hospitalised for one month, before she could be discharged. She came to the door with great effort. She was wheezing and gasping, finding it difficult to breathe normally. When she saw Dipika, her face lit up. She became so worked up emotionally that she started to cry. She

embraced Dipika tightly and said, ‘I was so worried.’ She looked at the gentleman questioningly. Dipika then introduced him to her and told her how he had saved her life and how grateful she was to him. Her mother then pulled Peter by his hand and said, “God bless you, Son. Dipika is all I have. If anything had happened to her, my life would have ended”. Peter then muttered under his breath, “It was only my duty, Madam,” and hurriedly left with a parting smile for Dipika.

Chapter 6

The Arrival of Satish



Tall and broad-shouldered, Satish rang the bell softly. He waited impatiently at the door, as if every delay, of even a minute, to be with his beloved Dipika, was too much for him. As Dipika opened the door, he took her in his arms, and kissed her tenderly. “I am so grateful to God that He had sent his angel to save you, for me. You must tell me all about this gentleman, so that I can thank him profusely, for I am indebted to him”. Every word of Satish was like a knife thrust at her heart. Even before Satish had left for Bombay, to join his new assignment, they had sat together in the park, holding hands, and planning their future. In a flash the memories of her childhood came back to her. Satish and she had grown up together. They had both studied in the same class in Holy Missions School. Whenever Dipika was absent, she would get all the information of what had transpired in school, from Satish, and Satish, vice versa. Many times, it happened that when she could not solve a problem in Mathematics, she would go to his house, which was nearby, and he, being the clever one, would explain it to her. Then Dipika was able to understand the intricacies

of the problems, and the subject no longer appeared challenging or frightening. There were other nostalgic memories. Satish's mother would prepare something very delicious, and both the children would relish with gusto whatever she served. Satish's mother would also take a walk with her son to Dipika's home, and Dipika's mother would entertain them with the exotic dishes which she had prepared. Both families became very close, and the children became fast friends. Small as they were, even at the age of seven, they promised to each other that when they grew up, they would get married. The parents thought their idea was perfect, and it was very sweet of the children to plan so far ahead. They were amused at their decision, but encouraged them nonetheless. Satish and Dipika decided to name their firstborn Vivek, and their daughter Rekha. As they became teenagers and felt the urges of emotions, they would often hide behind bushes in the park and kiss passionately. They experienced together, what it was to grow up into adulthood. Both felt the intensity of the urge of the teenagers, and gave to each other their unadulterated passion, melting into each other's arms in complete surrender. Physically, they felt they had become "one," but mentally also, they believed that they should not keep anything from each other. They poured out their hearts and thoughts without any inhibition to each other. According to them, two people in love should never have a wall between them. Their plans for the future stretched far into the years ahead.

Knowing each other so intimately, so Satish could sense that all was not well. He then very gently put a soul- probing question to Dipika, "Dipika, you are not yourself. What is it?" Dipika blushed a deep crimson and incoherently stammered something which was inaudible. Satish,

knowing her through and through, pulled Dipika close to him, stroked her soft, glossy hair soothingly, and tried to coax her into telling him the reason. “Remember, Dipika, we had promised never to keep anything from each other”. Dipika then, with a lot of stammering and stuttering, hesitatingly confessed how she had started having feelings for the stranger, who had given her back another lease of life after the accident. Satish listened to the details, and knew what his response should be. She had said that now, though she loved Satish dearly, she did not feel the same all-consuming love for him as she did for Peter. Satish trying to assuage her feeling of guilt, told her that it was only normal, as both of them had grown up together, they loved each other like siblings. She was fortunate, that she had found someone who could be her life partner, and to make it seem a very casual affair, added that one day he would also find the right person.

But though he had put on a very brave and indifferent exterior, Satish felt that he would choke to death, with the blow that Dipika’s words had inflicted on him. On the other hand, he felt he loved her with such intensity, that he could do anything for her happiness. For him, only that mattered, and without a sign of hurt, he told her in his magnanimous way that he was happy that she had matured into a full-fledged woman and was no more a giddy teen.

Chapter 7

Peter's Past Disillusionments



Peter's past was not replete with love, passion or rapturous episodes. It was neither very happy. As he was handsome, chivalrous and courteous, women were naturally attracted to him. They tried to bring him under their spell, with their feminine wiles, but he shrugged them off, like water off a duck's back, as he was not interested. His greatest predicament was that, since the women knew he held a high position, they presumed he would be drawing a fabulous salary. It was the honey they expected from marrying him, that drew them to him like a magnet, and they cooed, and buzzed, and flitted round him. They hummed around him like bees, and that was the greatest tragedy in his life. Out of the many "Butterflies," as he had named them, there were two with whom he was serious. But he soon found out that it was no use wasting his time, money, and energy on them. He became highly disillusioned, as his past life had given him a bitter taste of human nature. The fickleness of women, and their rapacious greed astounded him.

Chapter 8

Peter's Interaction with Veronica



Veronica had been vivacious and full of fun and laughter. Peter had liked her for her cheerfulness. She had been like the cool refreshing breeze from the sea, blowing away the stifling, hot wind of summer. She had been sweet to look at, with two deep dimples on both her cheeks. Her eyes would sparkle whenever she had to say something, and light up with mischief, whenever she had anything up her sleeve. Her hair would dance as she spoke excitedly about some adventure, or misadventure, that she had encountered during the day. She had been very much conscious of the fact that folks around her admired her appearance and the way she conducted herself. Peter himself was caught many times, appreciating her looks unawares. Just like a mischievous teenager, she had liked to play pranks on him. Once she had presented him with a big parcel as his birthday gift. It had been beautifully wrapped up, covered with an expensive wrapper, with colourful birds attractively printed on it, and tied artistically with a blue silk ribbon. Peter had gone on opening the wrappings one after the other till he reached the very last. In it had been only a small chocolate!

On another occasion, she had phoned up Peter, and asked him to come to her house immediately. She had slipped and fallen, and he had to take her to the hospital urgently, without delay, as she was in excruciating unbearable pain. He could hear her moaning and groaning, with intermittent sobs, over the telephone. When Peter had rushed, anxious and flustered, at breakneck speed to her house, he had found that nothing had happened to her, and she had been in splits laughing at his gullibility. Though he considered such pranks to be very immature, she had been full of life, which had endeared her to him. He had grown fond of her, and in his heart of hearts, he had even contemplated marrying her. As for her, she had been so presumptuous that she had formed her own pre-conceived ideas that she would be his wife, and she had warned him in earnest that if he fathered anybody else's child, there would be dire consequences. Peter did not take her threat seriously and laughed it off.

For Peter matrimony was a serious affair, as it was a commitment for life, so he expected a few positive traits in his future wife. Veronica would often tell him that she wanted a diamond necklace for her Engagement. The diamonds had to be such that people would notice them even from a distance. He had considered that to be extremely demanding, and exacting, almost like a voracious python, with its insatiable appetite! A diamond Engagement ring, he could understand, but did she not have any idea about the cost of a diamond?! If Veronica could ask for such an expensive gift even before they were married, he would not be able to satisfy her after marriage, with her inconsiderate, greedy, exploiting attitude! Such expectations would definitely lead to a clash, frustration, and marital unhappiness. "No," he reconsidered, "it would not be a wise decision." Then there had been other downsides and

negative points in Veronica, which Peter had noticed. Considering these attributes, she did not seem like a very good choice to be his wife. Whenever he had asked her, where she would like to dine, she would invariably select the costliest restaurant. Though he would have had to admit that when he entered the five star restaurants, with Veronica on his arms, all eyes had been on them, as they made an exquisite couple. She had dressed well, and carried herself with sophistication, but he knew what had laid ahead for him. She would pick out the most expensive drink, and an exotic item from the food menu, without any embarrassment. It seemed that she was just out to get all that she could, out of him. If he had suggested a cheaper alternative, but equally delectable item, the “lady” would straight away brazenly decline. It had also been an ‘eye - opener’ for Peter. Furthermore, Veronica, after relishing every bit of one main dish, would gluttonously order another. “No, his wife had to have more decency, be more polished and have more finesse.” That kind of behaviour had stirred up a feeling of disdain and repugnance in him, and his fondness for her had melted fast, evaporated like ice on a hot day. On the other hand, he had found himself in a very delicate situation, or so to say, an intractable dilemma.

As he was a man of integrity, according to his principles and moral code, it was not gentlemanly to drop a lady all of a sudden, just because he was no longer infatuated with her. But his was a calculated decision about his own future, after an in-depth analysis of the traits of Veronica’s character, as he had had time enough to know her. He had felt he was trapped. How could he distance himself from her without a guilty conscience? As he prided himself for being a man of character, he had to go all the way to the Altar. He could not back out as he was committed. Then something had

happened which changed the course of his life. A high-ranking gentleman had arrived from Dubai, with all the ostentations of one who was simply rolling in wealth, with a fleet of posh sleek cars, and many bungalows in the most expensive, sophisticated suburbs of New York. Immediately had Veronica stationed herself beside him, almost like his shadow, and used all her reprehensible charms to attract his attention, and his money! Peter had heaved a sigh of relief. He had felt as if he had been rescued from the mouth of a crocodile which was ready to gulp him down. He had thanked the Almighty from the core of his being for helping him out of his desperate predicament.

Chapter 9

Peter at his Altruistic Best



There had been another woman in his life. Her name was Angela. He had also developed a deep affection for her. He had first met her in the Club. His heart had gone out to her, because he saw the lone figure, sobbing softly in the quiet corner of the Library. He had asked her, if he could in anyway help her. She looked up with big pearl-like tears rolling down her shell-white cheeks. She looked exquisitely beautiful; he had made up his mind, then and there, to do whatever was in his power to wipe away those tears. He had pulled her up gently, and had been surprised to find that there was no resistance. He had led her to the garden outside, and had sat under the cool, comforting shade of a sprawling mango tree, with chirping birds hopping about from one branch to another. This had made the atmosphere very soothing. He had then coaxed her into telling him what made her so miserable, and assured her that he would not divulge it to anyone, as he was a man of integrity. She had been reluctant to say anything at first and only went on wiping her tears. Peter had told her furthermore that as he was a gentleman, he would keep his word, and she could rely

on him to keep her confidence. She could unburden her heart with whatever was worrying her, and he was sure that it would make her feel much better. At that, she had looked up as if to assess him. He noticed that she had large, innocent-looking eyes, but they were now tinged with pink, due to her crying so much.

After considering for a long time, she had started pouring out her heart in a soft, almost inaudible tone, halting many times in her narrative, and intermittently wiping her eyes, with a crushed, pastel-blue lace handkerchief.

Chapter 10

Angela tells her Story



Angela and Rupam had studied in Calcutta University together as class mates. Both of them had taken up English for their Post-graduation. He had been a brilliant student, so had Angela, which had brought them together. This is how their friendship had begun. Having the same hours for their classes, it had been convenient for them to plan out their evenings together. Folks at home had presumed that they were at the Library, busy with their studies, but they had been in a dream world of their own. Being together every day had brought them very close. Four years of friendship thus had grown into a strong bond and love. Rupam had finally proposed, and she had accepted happily, though they could not get married because neither of them was earning. But there is an urgency in love. Their love had to be consummated, and the impetuosity of youngsters cannot be bridled. Then something had happened that had turned their life topsy-turvy. Rupam's father's friend had offered him a top executive job in an English firm, which would send him to England. But the terms had been that he had to marry the friend's daughter before he left the country.

Angela had been shocked when Rupam had accepted the terms, and had even sent her an invitation card for the wedding. Angela had pleaded with him not to accept the offer, as she was carrying his child. She had been shocked when he had replied that he was not responsible for her own indiscretion, and she herself had to suffer for her own actions. Angela had spent hours with him in a hotel room, out of her own volition, and had willingly allowed his advances. He had not pressurised her, so he had been in no way committed and would pursue his own course to rise in his life. For her own happiness, she should forget the past.

Angela's rosy world had collapsed like a house of cards. After this episode, she had become like a rudderless boat, not knowing what to do, how to cope up with the trauma of losing a very special friend, and facing a bleak future. Her head had felt like it was carrying a weight of a thousand tons; it had throbbed as if somebody was playing a war drum. What she would do with the unborn child, had been her greatest worry. She had cared for Rupam so much, that she had wanted to keep their baby, as a part of him, all her life. But sooner or later, her family and friends would come to know that she was pregnant, and that would give her a bad name. Abortion had been out of the question, as she felt it was tantamount to murder. In her fifth month, she had left Kolkata on the pretext that her friend in Kurseong had invited her to spend a few days with her. After her child had been born, she had come back to Kolkata, but she had not known what to do with her precious baby. She had heard of an orphanage in Bandel run by nuns. She had felt no one would come to know about her baby, as the place was far from Kolkata, yet she could visit her baby easily. All this had happened three years back. But previously, she had a full life. She had used to go to restaurants, movies and

shopping with Rupam, but now her life was empty. She had no companion with whom she could spend the long evenings. She had been alone and lonely. The thought of her baby spending her childhood in an orphanage had tormented her.

Peter had heard all this in silence, holding her delicate hands in empathy. Immediately he had made up his mind. He had a soft heart, and by nature, he was altruistic. He would marry the girl and wipe off her tears forever. He had kept his thoughts to himself. He had started dating her every day and took her to places to cheer her up. In all determination, he had set out on his altruistic mission.

Chapter 11

Peter faces hurdles



Peter, by his constant effort, had found out Angela's likes and dislikes, the kind of movies she liked to see, and also the food items she relished. Angela had loved to watch the ripples in a river and distant boats gliding by against the azure horizon. On the other hand, she had mentioned that she could not bear to watch fishermen catch fish in their nets whilst the helpless creatures wriggled and twisted, trying to find an escape. As the fish flapped about, trying to extricate themselves unsuccessfully, finally puffing laboriously for want of oxygen, Angela had suffered with them. She had become depressed that human beings, just to appease their taste buds, selfishly subjected the fish to so much pain. Peter had taken her in his red Wagon-R to Diamond Harbour so that she could enjoy the drive and finally sit beside the river to watch the ripples. He had only wanted the satisfaction of knowing that he had been able to infuse some sunlight into a person's dark world. But he had looked on with bewilderment, and dismay when he had seen large tear drops, roll down her ashen cheeks. He enquired, stunned, as to why she was crying. The reply he had got

was disheartening. She had remembered with nostalgia, the last time she had come with Rupam, he had looked at the boats sailing by, and he had promised to take her one day across the river in a boat, to a distant village with swaying coconut palms. They would have a cosy hut of their own and live there happily with their two children, a girl and a boy. Now there was no one to take her to the village of their dreams.

She had also told him that she loved to snack on the dimpled, dancing 'luchis', piping hot from the wok. To give her the joy of eating her favourite item, he had taken her to a famous restaurant, where one could get soft, bloated luchis. But Angela could not put them in her mouth. She excused herself by saying that, three years back, she and Rupam had so much fun, each competing with the other, trying to pick the most puffed-up 'luchi' for the other, and even putting the luchis in each other's mouths. Down-hearted Peter had eaten the whole lot himself.

Then for her birthday, after looking around in seven or eight shops, Peter had selected a beautiful georgette saree for her. She would look as dainty as the delicate wispy clouds of Spring, when she wore it. She had taken it in her hand and shook her head sadly, and said, she could never wear that colour again, as that had been the colour of Rupam's first gift to her, which was a dress. Peter had come to the conclusion that by marrying her, he could not make her happy. Furthermore, it had become a regular routine for him to drive every weekend to Bandel, to the orphanage in which Angela had left her baby. On the way she would rattle off how her daughter had taken after Rupam. She seemed to be as intelligent as her father. She had same distinctive features as well. Every time she had looked at her daughter, she saw Rupam. Peter heard it all, but he had been tolerant,

and understanding, giving her full scope to pour out her heart. Angela had pointed out a little girl to him. Seeing the tiny-tot his heart had melted. She had been wearing an out-size frock, which was soiled, perhaps because she had been wearing it for a few days. Her hair had been dishevelled as no one had brushed it for her. She had been having puffed rice from a cracked plastic bowl. Every time she had tried to put it into her mouth, most of it had fallen from her small fingers into the bowl again. Once she had looked up and saw them watching her, she had given them a broad smile, and won over their hearts. At least for the child, Peter had decided that he would marry the mother. His soft heart had got the better of him as against practical wisdom, and he had made up his mind to propose to Angela. Though Peter was apprehensive that he could be rejected by her, because of her steadfast love for Rupam, who had unceremoniously dumped her.

Here the story took an unforeseen turn. When he had entered Angela's flat, he was in for a surprise. She had confided in him that she was going to move on. She had said that there was no reason for her to destroy herself, and her child, for the sake of one who did not deserve her love and loyalty. She had decided that she would take up as a challenge, the task of making her child's life one of happiness and success. She had seen how her child was suffering, when she had visited her in the orphanage. The little girl had been helplessly undergoing so much neglect, and hardship, because of her action, and no fault of hers. That was unfair and selfish. Stirred up by her motherly instinct, she was all out to protect her baby from the harshness of life. She would adopt the child legally, and tell everyone that she had done so, as she was lonely. Her barren life would find fulfilment in the companionship of her little

one, who would once more bring sunshine into her life. She would not ever marry, as she was disillusioned by men's fickle nature.

Angela had looked transfigured by her resolution. Peter had driven her once more to Bandel and she had been filled with ecstasy pressing her baby to her heart. Peter had felt rewarded! Nevertheless, these were the two unsuccessful attempts of Peter's trying to find a life partner.

Chapter 12

The Single Mother



Now we will come back to the story of the self-sacrificing Dipika, who, after marrying Peter, whom she loved dearly, had left her home where she belonged. She had opted for a life away from Peter even when she was carrying his child. She had done so that Peter's mother, being a psychiatric patient, would not, in her bouts of hysteria, have an attack of stroke, or contemplate taking her own life. But despite the many trying and tough times she had gone through because of her decision, Dipika was the personification of self-confidence, oozing exuberance and radiance, which was exceptional, considering the past events of her life.

She was humming the same lullaby that she used to put her baby to sleep. She had nicknamed her "Curly Locks" because of the bunch of soft curls which would cover her daughter's head. The lullaby was her own composition. Everything had to be special for Curly Locks. The lullaby ran like this - "My Baby is so much fun. She is brightest under the Sun. She is a bundle of joy. My very precious toy." Then she would ask her 'Little One' " , Whose toy?" Then her baby would reply,

“Mummy’s!” Slowly, Curly Locks would be overcome with sleep, and her voice would become fainter and trail off. Now, as Dipika got ready for the office, unknowingly, she had begun to sing, and the toddler joined in, put both her arms around her mother, and said, “Mummy’s.” This had become a game between the two.

Dipika hurriedly put two slices of bread in the toaster. She would have it without any butter or spread, only with a thin coating of Marmite. She liked the crunch of the crisp toast when she bit into it. She loved eggs, and for a complete breakfast, she rustled up two sunny-side up eggs in minutes. The look of the lush yellow yolks of the eggs with a sprinkling of black pepper on them looked delectable, and she appreciatively muttered to herself, “Aren’t I a good Chef?” She had already made her coffee with a lot of milk, but no sugar. She took care to look after her appearance, as well as her health. She did not believe in eating extra calories, just for the sake of taste. She looked elegant and slim. She took a cursory glimpse of herself in the mirror, and she liked what she saw. She glanced at her little daughter, and her heart welled up with love. Ritika (her daughter’s real name) was now busy trying to coax her doll into having some bread, but when she failed, she decided to help her mother with the household chores by putting the jar of coffee in the cupboard. As she couldn’t reach the top of the table, she pulled up a chair, climbed onto it, and skilfully descended with the glass jar in her tiny hands, completing the task with satisfaction. Dipika beamed at her and said, “Thank you, my darling!”

Dipika then looked at her watch. An imperceptible frown was the only manifestation of the irritation that was brewing in her mind. She hated being late for the office, and she could not leave her baby unattended. She took out her mobile phone. As she was going to dial the number of the Caregiver, a figure rushed into the room, and before even

greeting Dipika, in a torrent of words, cursed the traffic in Kolkata, and swore that she was going to highlight the inefficiency of the government. As she was of a robust constitution and well past her youth, she was justified in expressing her displeasure whilst breathing heavily with the exertion. With her scanty grey hair flying in all directions, and her buxom breasts heaving like the underside of a toad, she spluttered and stuttered, and rolled her bulging eyes round the room. Dipika being considerate, and understanding, drew up a chair for the Caregiver. Then she explained, in her patient, deliberate way, the schedule the Caregiver had to meticulously follow. She was careful to explain every detail in detail, as any misunderstanding could harm her baby. After that, she pulled her baby to her heart and kissed her with the intensity of a mother's love.

Ritika clung on to her, and burst into tears. "Don't leave me Mummy," she pleaded. But when Dipika tore herself away from her, she went on sobbing, clutching on to her doll, which was her only comfort! The Caregiver looked at the child with exasperation and then told her, with her bulging eyes seeming to bulge out even more, that if Ritika did not stop crying, she would call the bogey man. The toddler had no idea who the bogeyman was, but she knew it should be something to dread, and she stopped crying, only to burst into tears again after a short respite. All she wanted at the moment was her mother, and she knew her mother had left her and would not come back. Mrs. Lombardy, the Caregiver, then held the child's hand in a tight grip, and started to drag Ritika out of the house — only she did not know where to, as she had left her diary in her house, in which she had carefully noted down the addresses where she was to deposit the child. She had been late for her appointment with Dipika, and in the hurry and scurry, she had inadvertently left it at home.

Chapter 13

Mrs. Lombardy



Mrs. Lombardy had crossed the fiftieth year of her life. She was dressed in a skimpy red skirt, almost bursting at the seams, which exposed her fleshy, flabby thighs, and part of her inner-wear. In her own estimate, her attire was very fashionable and chic. Her lace blouse revealed a pair of rebellious breasts, protesting to be constricted, which gave the impression of being voluptuous. Hers had been a marriage which was ill-matched. She had fallen deeply in love with a dashing chauffeur. He was many years elder to her. When she was eighteen, he was thirty years. He used to drive a Maruti Suzuki for his owner. But whenever his Master, Mr Ghosh would go out of town for his official work, Robert - that was the man's name - would take a spin round the town, with her sitting beside him. She was a good conversationalist and kept him entertained with her colourful stories. Besides, she had all the charm and sexual appeal which a man would want. This went on for a whole year, and finally their togetherness led to the altar. But this marriage did not last very long. After five years of fights and quarrels, it ended up in a divorce. He used to come home

with different women every day, half drunk. He had become addicted to alcohol, so he lost his job as a driver. Now he would eke out a living with difficulty. He did not have the means to support himself, let alone a wife. In his drunken state, he would come home and demand from her his dinner, and when she would try to reason with him, and tell him that, without money, how was it possible for her to prepare his meal, he would thrash her black and blue. Once, their two-year-old daughter had started screaming with fright. He had told her to shut up, but when she didn't, he picked her up and brutally throttled her to death. When he had come to his senses, seeing the lifeless body on the floor, he had warned her, in no uncertain terms, that if she opened her mouth about the incident to anyone, he would teach her the lesson of her life, and she would live to regret her indiscretion. Robert had put the inert body of their daughter in a gunny bag. So that it would not float in the water, he had also put in a heavy brick in it. Then he had tied it up, taken it to the nearby pond, and dropped it without anyone noticing. Helplessly, she had looked on without a murmur and without a sob. But she had made up her mind to divorce the man who had killed her innocent child. He was a vicious and a blood-thirsty man. Before they parted ways, he threatened to get her arrested in a police case, so that she would be locked up in prison, with no further risk or complication for him.

Since Mrs. Lombardy had divorced her husband, her one goal was to get a partner, who would provide her with the prerequisites of sustenance. But she had lost all her feminine charm, and glamour. Her inner frustration, and disharmony with self, was reflected in her looks. Her hair had also lost its sheen, and looked like dry straw, with patches of her shiny scalp, giving evidence to her thinning hair. Her skin

and complexion looked like a lizard's, and had lost its freshness with overuse of cheap caustic make-up. In the prime of her life, people had used to admire her sophisticated elegance. But now her only pastime was eating and sleeping. As a result, she had become rotund and flabby, and in appearance, grotesque.

Mrs. Lombardy had tried various means to earn a living, but not with much success. She would desperately try to get a satisfactory job, but her appearance was a big set-back for her. In order to look young, she would wear such dresses that made her look comical and tawdry. She plastered herself with garish make-up, which was revolting. Unused to wearing stilettos, invariably for her interviews, she would walk in, balancing on them, with the net result that she would twist her ankle and fall to the consternation of all. All her efforts to get a worthwhile job came to dead end. But earn she must for her own survival! In the end, she joined an organisation that was involved in trafficking girls to foreign countries. It was a good paying job, which would relieve her of the constant worries of day-to-day expenditure. She would pose as a governess, and kidnap small girls, and hand them on to Agents. This was an easy means of earning money.

The police were trying to nab those who were responsible for such a heinous act, but till date they had not succeeded. The parents of the children were to be blamed for this, as they feared the kidnappers would harm their offspring, so the incidents were not reported on time. When Mrs. Lombardy saw an advertisement for a baby-sitter's job, she put in her application. At that time, Dipika was in dire need of help, who would look after the child when she had to leave for the office. She went through all the testimonials, which Mrs. Lombardy had shown her. Unfortunately, though they

happened to be all excellent credentials, they were all fake, which the lady had procured for the purpose of the interviews. Dipika had no inkling of the background of such nefarious activities. She felt she could rely on Mrs. Lombardy, after going through all the testimonials, and entrusted the precious “Apple of her Eye” to her care.

Chapter 14

The Home-Coming



Dipika hurried to get home after her office duties were over. She thrust her files anyhow into her bag, and rushed out. She had planned to get a few things from the Mall. Her baby would be so happy to see her back. As she went from shop to shop, she picked up a slate, and a few pieces of coloured chalk. She could almost visualize her little girl drawing a house, being completely satisfied with herself. As an after-thought, she also selected a colouring book, and crayons. Her eyes fell on a 'Walky-Talky' doll. She grabbed it before anyone could lay their hands on it. She was entranced seeing the doll walking, moving her hands and saying "Mama". Ritika would be delighted with her gifts. With so many parcels and her office bag, she kept dropping items. She was relieved when she boarded the Uber, and with her heart pounding with suppressed excitement, she alighted at the door of her house. She used her key to open the door, and tiptoed in to surprise her Little One. From room to room, she searched, but there was no sign of Mrs. Lombardy or her daughter. Frantic with misgivings and apprehensions, her whole body started trembling like a skyscraper building

during an earthquake. Hurriedly, she tried to call up Mrs. Lombardy on her mobile, but every time, a voice said that the number was switched off. She did not know what to do next. Surely, at seven o'clock in the evening, the lady was not in the Park with her daughter. Or, had the girl got hurt whilst playing, and she had taken her to the Doctor for first aid? There were so many possibilities, but she could not wait a moment longer. She had to have her baby in her arms. Blindly, she rushed out, but she had no idea where she was going or what she was going to do. It was too recent an incident to report to the police, on the other hand, once it was night, she would not even be able to go out to search for her. Then a thought struck her, and she felt electrified with excitement. At last, perhaps she had guessed correctly where her baby could be. She frantically tried to make phone calls.

The words reverberated in her mind over and over again, the words uttered two years back, but they came back to her now, with acute poignancy. "Dipika, you are making the biggest mistake in your life. One day, you will be left with nothing, you will find that the child will be torn from your arms, and you will be left with only a big void. Dipika burst into tears— "No one is to take my Baby from me—— no, I won't let anyone even touch my little Darling!" She sobbed helplessly. She was shattered. It seemed somebody was beating a drum inside her head, which was throbbing with anxiety. Her hands had become icy cold. They were shaking as if she were suffering from Parkinson's. Her face had become flushed, and recalcitrant tears rushed down her cheeks, though she made a desperate effort to control them. Dipika tried to call an Uber, but her hands were trembling. Then a thought came to her mind. When Mrs. Lombardy had taken out Ritika, the man at the fruit stall, way down

the road, must have seen them. She used to buy oranges from him every day to make juice for her little Loved One. He knew her and had often seen her with her baby. She approached him with quickened steps. She was in a tremendous hurry, as she felt she would burst with anxiety, not knowing the whereabouts of her daughter. A young boy of about twenty was manning the stall. He informed her, that a fat lady was pulling a little girl by her hand, and the child was trying to resist, and crying loudly, “I want my Mummy!” The woman was shouting too, and threatening to call the “Bogey Man”. Then, at the Bus Stop, she thought of asking the man at the Tea Stall, who was selling tea in paper cups. He seemed to be in his eighties, more dead than alive and not the reliable type to give her the correct information. After she had enquired three or four times about her daughter, the man seemed to realise that she was talking to him. He looked at her through his bi-focal glasses and took some time to grasp what she was saying. Then very slowly and with deliberate pauses, he recounted what had actually happened. First of all, there was a lot of commotion, as the passengers thought the woman with the girl was a child-lifter. They made the bus wait till the police arrived. Dipika heard with her heart pounding that her little girl had fallen from the bus, and had hurt herself so badly that she was bleeding profusely. Seeing her in that condition, an elderly man, moved with compassion, had hailed a taxi, and taken her to the hospital. Instantly, she knew she had to search in all the hospitals to find her little daughter. One after another she went to all the hospitals nearby with no result, when an idea struck her. The man at the Tea Stall had said that the police had been called, so she phoned up the Police Thana. The Policeman was very cooperative and handed her the phone number of the gentleman who had taken the

girl to the hospital. When she rang him up, there was no response. Over and over she tried and every time her anxiety became more intense. At last, somebody responded. She heard a man's deep voice. She asked him about the whereabouts of Ritika. He informed her that the Care-giver had come later on and had taken the child. She once again came up against a dead end and nearly collapsed.

Chapter 15

Dipika makes Enquiries



On not getting any positive clue, Dipika was in a frenzy, as if stung by a wasp. She had to find Ritika, but it was already too late in the evening. All by herself, she felt helpless. For the first time in two years, she felt that if Peter were there too, he would have been a tremendous help. She dialled his number twice but there was no response. After all the little one was also his child and he would be equally concerned. Should she call Satish—she debated, after all he was her closest friend. But she had to act and do something to find her baby. Then a thought struck her. Dipika decided to go in person to the nearby Police Thana to find out whether they knew about the whereabouts of her child. But her visit to the Thana was not very helpful, as they said the policeman who was on duty had gone home when his duty hours were over. At that, she asked the on-duty personnel for the Police officer's phone number. After going through the records, he found his phone number. By this time, Dipika felt that she was nearly becoming insane with anxiety. She quickly dialled the number, but a female voice answered the phone. On enquiring about the police officer, she informed

her that she would ask him to call her when he had had his shower. Dipika felt it was too much for her to bear as time ticked by and impediments piled up one after the other. She clasped and unclasped her cold hands in utter frustration. She felt as if her head were filled with deadening echoing sounds. She could not get rid of them. They were becoming louder and louder. All of a sudden, the mobile started ringing. It pierced through her eardrums like a sharp needle. She jumped with nervousness and prayed repeatedly that the call was from the police officer. But as her luck would have it, it was from the Pharmacy, asking her when they should send the medicines she had ordered. Then, after a few agonising minutes, which seemed to have frozen, there was another call, and this time it was from the Police Official. He simply told her what she already knew - that the gentleman had taken the girl to Tata Memorial Hospital, where they had administered first aid to the girl. After that, the governess had taken the girl with her. The hospital management had been reluctant to hand over the child to her, but when she was able to produce Dipika's appointment letter, they could not keep the child. Once again, Dipika faced a frustrating brick wall. She could not see even a glimmer of light through the dark tunnel she had to navigate. What was her next move? She realised she could not get back her child, without the help of the police, as Mrs. Lombardy could have handed over the girl to anyone by now, including men who did nefarious business of trafficking girls. She knew she had to act fast, as any delay would mean a lower chance of getting the child back. The policemen set out at once, and Dipika accompanied them in the Police jeep. Mrs. Lombardy's house was in the suburbs. It took them forty-five minutes to reach her house, which seemed to Dipika to be forty-five years. They went through

many lanes and by-lanes, and she was sure she would not be able to find the place again on her own. Luckily, they were in a jeep; a car would have had to get a new shock absorber!

When they reached their destination, the police officers jumped out of the jeep. They entered the flat by opening the rickety door with their special key. As they stepped in, an untidy room came into view. Five or six dresses were thrown anyhow on the bed. The drawer in the writing table was gaping wide open, with manuscripts all in a disarray. Some had fallen on the floor, and with the breeze coming in from the door, had flown to the corner of the room. A cracked, stained teacup, with some brown liquid in it, was still on the table, and a half-eaten dried-up bun was nestling beside it. There was a shabby, faded bag kept on the side table, with the contents struggling to come out. The police officer went through the scribbled sheets, carelessly stuffed into the bag, and studied them with interest. Then all of a sudden, he jumped up like a rubber ball, and bursting with excitement, cried out, "Hey Matthew, we have here the dynamite which can blow to smithereens the entire caucus of gangsters, who have eluded the police for years." They flipped through the pages and it seemed that the list of names gave them immense satisfaction. They took down the addresses on their mobile phones and looked at each other meaningfully. It seemed they had come across a matter of great importance. Both of them seemed in a hurry to take immediate action and decided to act quickly, or else much harm would come to the child.

Chapter 16

The Police Team Investigates



The Police Inspector summoned the waiting jeep with a wave of his hand, and the vehicle rolled up with a rattling sound, and stopped in front of them. They asked Dipika to come along with them, and she obliged willingly. She would burst with anxiety if she had to wait by herself, not knowing how far the Police team had been successful in finding her daughter. She also wanted to be with her 'Little One' as fast as circumstances permitted. They were heading to the address they had discovered in one of the diaries. It was of an Agency which said they were the Trustees of "Home for God's Children". But the officer knew that they dealt in a downright reprehensible business of buying and selling children. It was a very lucrative business, as human organs sold at a very high price, and there was a great demand for blood. Some girls were also sold to foreign customers, who professed to adopt the children, but actually, it was the despicable sex trade. The police had made many attempts to nab them, but they were able to evade arrest because of rampant corruption and some legal loopholes. But knowing

fully well how fast their network acted, the Policemen rushed to the location to save the child.

The jeep came to a grinding halt in front of the paint-chipped iron-gate, on which hung a board, on which it was prominently printed in brilliant red, "Home for God's Children." The Officer rang the bell twice, but there was no response. Dipika held her breath. In her agitation, she dug her nails into her palm, which started to bleed. Then, the Officer rattled the latch, and this time very loudly. A shrivelled-up, sunken face appeared for a moment and then disappeared. After a long pause, a frail man in his eighties eventually stood, clutching the half-broken door. He enquired in an irritated tone, why they were disturbing them at such an odd hour. He had a very gruff and guttural voice and rude mannerisms. His face was equally distasteful. Loose skin hung over both his eye-sockets. His lips protruded, revealing a dark, toothless cavity. His eyes were shifty, and his eyebrows were knitted in the centre of his forehead, in a show of annoyance. Again, he demanded in an angry voice what business had brought them to the cursed orphanage, where no sane person would ever step in. The police man showed his credentials, and informed him that he was on his official duty, trying to find the whereabouts of a lost child. The man banged the door in their face with a vulgar profanity. After that there was no movement from within, and they waited with as much patience as they could muster. Again, the police officer rattled the latch forcefully, expressing annoyance and irritation, but there was still no response. Then he bellowed out, "If you don't let us in, I will break open the door." With his voice rising to penetrate the heavy silence of the night, with a grating sound the gate was reluctantly thrown open.

As the team entered, a long, dimly lit corridor came into view. A low-powered bulb hung from the high ceiling, enveloped in cobwebs. The paint had come off in blotches from the walls, as if an artist had been experimenting with his skills in modern art. All the doors were also cracked and chipped, with broken pieces of wood sticking out threateningly. A sliver of beam of light had hesitatingly encroached on the floor of the corridor, from one of the rooms, in which the door was ajar. It seemed that its occupant had opened the gate to them.

On both sides of the narrow corridor were locked rooms. At the end, the “guide” opened a door. He informed them that it was the dormitory for the orphaned children, who were sleeping, and they had to be careful not to disturb them. An elderly lady was sitting at a dilapidated, wobbly table and knitting. When she saw the visitors, she got up to meet them, but with great difficulty. It was quite evident that it meant too much effort for her, because she uttered an expletive under her breath. She must have been in her eighties. The old lady had tied up her straw-like hair in a bun at the back, which looked like a bird’s nest. She could not stand straight and bent forward in an arch. With a toothless formal smile, she extended her gnarled hands to greet them. The police officers ignored the gesture and made their enquiries in a brusque manner. They wanted to know how many inmates there were, and whether there had been any children admitted recently. The lady told them that there were a hundred plus children, but no child had come in within the past week. The policemen went up to each bed and, with the help of a lantern, looked at their faces so that Dipika could identify her daughter if she were there. In the pale light of the lantern, their faces looked paler and almost ghost-like. There was something odd about their

appearances. The officers, completing their investigation, moved out of the room. As they came out into the corridor and were about to leave, a nerve-wracking, blood-curdling shriek made them come to a paralysing stop, as if lightning had struck them. The tortured scream came from the upper part of the building. The policemen, without losing a second, rushed up to the top floor. As the Police personal sprinted up the broken staircase, the wooden planks shook and shuddered, as if an earthquake had struck, making a splitting, cracking sound with every step. A solid wooden door barred the entrance. The old man who was their guide followed them, holding on to the railing to protect himself from falling from the rickety stairs. The boards creaked, and announced the arrival of the visitors. Again, that chilling cry filled the entire building with an atmosphere of terror. Then the sobbing of a child could be heard, imploring the tormentor to let her off. It was a piteous voice, begging to spare her, a voice that almost made Dipika rush to the child's side and pick her up, to comfort and soothe her, and to make her feel safe, ensconced in a mother's protective arms. As the police team entered the "out of bounds" area, they saw a nurse in a stained, torn uniform pushing a trolley full of surgical equipment and bottles into the room. The guide stuttering in embarrassment, quickly explained that one of the orphan girls was suffering from appendicitis, and as it was an acute case, she had to be operated urgently without delay. The shriek and the wailing were from the girl who was scared of the operation. The police officer noted down what he said, but knew they were carrying on their sordid business of selling organs from live donors, for which there was great demand. Because of their connection with the top brass in the government, they always escaped without any action being taken against them. The team was

sure that, once again, their efforts would prove futile, as all that mattered in the world was money. People had become devoid of conscience or the finer human qualities. They had put two and two together, and why the children in the dormitory looked ashen white. Their blood was drawn regularly and sold in the market at an exorbitant price. Knowing that their hands were tied, because of rampant corruption, there was no use even to report the heinous crimes which continued unabated at the cost of innocent, helpless children.

Chapter 17

Mrs. Lombardy's Predicament



At this juncture we must revert to Mrs. Lombardy to fully appreciate the turn of events, and what fate actually befell the little girl.

Across the city, Mrs. Lombardy dragged the little girl from the house with all her might. Though Ritika had stopped whimpering when the lady had threatened to call the Bogey Man, she was terrified, and could not control the sobs which were welling up in her. Mrs Lombardy tripped over the stones which lay in her path and cursed loudly. The heel of her stiletto came off, and again she cursed louder. There was no time for delaying, as the passersby were all staring at the two of them. They had become suspicious as the child was crying uncontrollably, and saying, “I want to go to my Mother. Let me go.” She had to reach the bus stop on any account. Big drops of perspiration ran down her hot body. She breathed heavily, and the unpleasant sonorous sound, together with the high-pitched crying, made a bizarre combination that could be heard from a distance. Mrs Lombardy waited impatiently for the bus to arrive. One bus

after another rolled in, but not the one they were going to board. At last, when the much-awaited bus stopped, in the hurry and scurry, and the excitement of the moment, she could not lift Ritika onto the bus. The child fell on the hard, pot-holed pavement, and a fountain of blood spurted from her forehead. Ritika lay in an inert mass. Seeing the child hurt, the passengers of the bus came running to pick her up. Now their anger fell on the lady, who had been careless to drop the child. Mrs. Lombardy panicked and started calling on all the Saints in Heaven to save her. She was terrified! Some of the onlookers were so worked up and agitated, that they started accusing Mrs. Lombardy of kidnapping Ritika. They surmised that otherwise the girl would not have been so reluctant to go with her. As soon as the idea was expressed, the crowd became aggressive, and took on the mood of the “killer mob.” “Don’t let the woman get away with the child,” was the chorus. Mrs Lombardy nearly had a heart attack - she was like a cat on a hot tin roof. She wondered if she had any scope to escape. Her flabby body shook with the fear which gripped her like a vice. She could hardly move as if she had been chained with fear. Somebody shouted, “The girl must be taken to the hospital immediately.” One gentleman from the crowd volunteered to call a taxi, and do the needful. He started booking an Uber. In the meantime, somebody made a complaint to the Police. Two Officers arrived on the motorbike. Then followed questioning, and more questioning. To make the situation more tense for Mrs. Lombardy, she noticed from the corner of her eye, a dishevelled man board the bus. He had on a shabby, torn shirt, and a pair of dirty jeans. Her trembling hand had become icy cold, as she recognized it was no other than her divorced husband. He looked more dangerous and fearsome, with his stained teeth jutting out

like a snake's, which was about to strike, and his bloodshot eyes telling the tale of excessive drinking. His last words came back to her. "I give you my word that next time I meet you, I will see to it that you serve a lifetime in jail. I cannot forget your shabby treatment of me---refusing to give me a morsel to eat when I came home hungry! Remember, there is a child's body rotting in the pond, and as the perpetrator of the crime, I will point to you." Mrs. Lombardy fainted under the pressure from all sides. Now what happened to Little Ritika is yet to be seen.

Chapter 18

Mrs. Lombardy finds a Solution



There was a great deal of excitement. Some of the passengers descended and gathered around the figure on the ground. After a while, the woman stirred. As she opened her eyes, the crowd exclaimed in unison, “Don’t let her go - she should be kept behind bars for kidnapping. She is a despicable low-down criminal.” Slowly, Mrs. Lombardy tried to get up, but collapsed again under the weight of her body. Her blood pressure had gone up because of the tension, and her eyesight had become blurred. Two Sergeants pulled her up.

The Police Officer had taken down the name, address and phone number of the gentleman who had called the Uber, to take the child to Tata Memorial Hospital. They asked Mrs. Lombardy to get on the bike, and proceed to the Police Thana, but the woman could not manage this difficult task because of her obese dimensions. In the meantime, the bus had left with the passengers. The Inspector started interrogating the woman who was still perspiring heavily because of the trauma. They made her sit on a stone bench

by the side of the road. He was satisfied when she was able to prove that she was a caregiver. She showed them her fake credentials and Dipika's appointment letter given to her. Luckily, she had left at her home the addresses of the Agents doing business in Trafficking children. She would have been in great trouble, if they had found out that she was also involved with the notorious gang. Mrs. Lombardy then left for Tata Memorial Hospital to collect her ward. At the hospital, she saw the child had been attended to, but she was still whimpering. Mrs. Lombardy's head was in a tizzy. Ritika had become her daunting problem. She took charge of the girl, but she could not figure out what to do with her. She could not go to her own flat as the policemen were sure to have reached there, on Dipika's having reported that her child was missing. Besides she could not deposit the child in any of the Agent's addresses, which were in the first place, not with her. The policemen would be sure to visit all the given addresses they would find. She then decided to put up for the night at her friend's flat, who had asked her many times to spend a few days with her. She nervously hailed an Auto rickshaw, and somehow managed to reach her destination, with the girl being the source of all her difficulties, and problems. Ritika had fallen asleep, as a result of her continuous crying, and the monotonous movement of the vehicle, and was nearly falling off from the speeding auto. Tired as she was, now she came up against another obstacle. She went on ringing the apartment's bell, but there was no response. Then she realized that perhaps her friend had gone off on a vacation, as she had previously mentioned that she may. She was in a fix. It was not possible to leave the girl with the Agents, as she was sure the police would be making raids at those places. She cursed herself for having carelessly left the address book at home. But she

had to disappear, as the police, knowing her involvement, would come in search of her. Then a thought came to her mind. It was best for her to leave the girl on the road, and then make her escape. But as she was leaving, Ritika clung to her in fear, pleading not to leave her in the dark. Then surprisingly, the motherly instinct in her, prompted her to take the next step. She remembered her little girl, who had been throttled to death by her father. She had also cried out to her in panic, and had tried to cling to her, clutching on to her dress with her baby hands, but Mrs. Lombardy had been helpless, and her Little One had been heartlessly taken away from her. She took Ritika by her hand and started looking for an Uber. She would spend the night at the Railway Station in the Waiting Room with the girl and not abandon her in the terrifying darkness of the night. But when she reached the station, a better idea struck her.

Chapter 19

Dipika Solicits Help



In her time of crisis, Dipika knew there was one person who would come forward to be at her side to comfort her, lend his strength to protect her, and help her out of all difficult situations. Once more, she stood in front of the same door through which she had entered, as a happy bride, not long ago. She also remembered how Peter had pulled her to his side, and into his arms, and had kissed her passionately. He had said, “This is your new home for the rest of your life.” But these words remained only words as the future events unfolded. She rang the bell once, but there was no response. Twice and thrice, she pressed the buzzer, but even then, no one opened the door. Eventually feeling frustrated and defeated, she rang up Peter. As soon as she heard his voice, her pent-up tears came rushing out in an uncontrollable deluge, and she went on sobbing like a small child who had at last found his lost father. “Peter, I need you to find our Baby, who has been kidnapped, and she must be crying her heart out with fright.” Peter asked her where she was, and in his usual efficient manner, told her comfortingly that he would be with her in a matter of minutes. Everything was

going to be fine, as both of them would put their combined efforts into searching for their Baby together.

Dipika sat clasping and unclasping her hand in utter agitation. For her, the time seemed to have stopped, so not knowing what to do, she walked up and down, muttering to herself, “Peter, why are you taking so long to come?” As she saw the beaming light of the car piercing through the darkness of the night, she ran to him, as if that would hasten the search. He had hardly been able to step out when she, without any inhibition, threw herself into his arms and broke down in a paroxysm of uncontrollable tears. Very gently, he held her in a close embrace and stroked her hair to comfort her. The warmth of his body seemed to calm her down. “Peter, I need you - I need you to find our Baby as fast as you can.” The very words sent an inexplicable sensation through his body. His jaws tightened in determination, but his expression softened as he held the woman whom he loved more than anything in the world. But fate, and his sense of duty, had forced him to tear her asunder from his bleeding heart. He had bled in silence, as there was no other option. Now, as he held her close to his heart, he felt that a soothing balm had been applied over his painful sore. Each night, he had tossed and turned, unable to sleep or find any comfort or peace. Peter felt he had wronged her, but there was no way that he could resolve the problem. He revelled in the sensation of her nearness, like one who gets to eat just a morsel of food after prolonged starvation. How dearly he loved the woman in his arms! And then the thought of a painful episode from the past stabbed his mind, and left a dark, sinister cloud, shrouding his mind. But mercifully, at that juncture, he was interrupted in his reverie by Dipika, who asked him to drive her to her apartment, where she would tell him everything, so he could appreciate the gravity of the critical situation they were facing.

Chapter 20

Peter Reminiscences



Holding Dipika close to his heart, regret and remorse had clutched his conscience like a vice, and “what was” and “what could have been” brought the picture of the past and the day when everything had come to a standstill into his life in sharp focus. Every detail of the incident which had occurred three years back stabbed him afresh with brutal poignancy.

It had been a beautiful day. Being a Sunday, Peter and Dipika had spent the entire morning chit-chatting, enjoying each other’s company, munching on ‘pakoras’, and at intervals sharing a joke and breaking into laughter. It was evident that both were “made for each other”. But there had been ‘something up Dipika’s sleeve’, so to say, as Peter had noticed she was giggling too much. Many times, he had tried to coax her into telling him, but in vain. Peter simply could not come to terms with the fact that his good fortune had allowed him to have Dipika as his wife, so unassuming yet so sophisticated; elegant yet so girlish. Her long curling lashes outlined her innocent walnut brown eyes. Her slim

shapely figure looked becoming in both Indian and Western outfits. But the reason why she had captured his heart was that she seemed to be the woman of his dreams! All of a sudden, she had gone to rustle up something special in the kitchen for everybody, as that day was a special day. Before giving an explanation why she considered that particular day to be so special, she had gone into Peter's mother's bedroom and enquired from her what special item she would desire for lunch – the old lady wanted parathas stuffed with cauliflower. But when she asked Peter about his preference, he said only a 'raita' would be fine, as he could not spare too much time away from Dipika, busying herself in the kitchen. Besides, he wanted to spare her the trouble of doing too much. When Dipika had laid the table and there was a mouth-watering aroma in the dining room, she invited Peter and his mother to partake of the delicacies she had prepared and enjoy what she had cooked. When both of them had been sitting at the table, she had said she was feeling very happy, and told them that she had a secret which she wanted to share with them. Both had looked at her expectantly. Then, with a tantalising pause, she had announced that a Baby would soon become a part of the family. With the latest development, she felt she was inextricably bound to Peter for life. Peter was overwhelmed with the news, and his excitement and his happiness knew no bounds. In an emotional outburst, he had forgotten the presence of his mother and taken Dipika in his arms and kissed her over and over again. Immediately, the mother, like a dark cloud, had blocked the sunshine of their happiness. She had shaken her twisted gnarled fingers in front of her newly married daughter-in-law, like an angry headmistress, at a recalcitrant student. "Mind you, Dipika, I am not going to tolerate your nonsense any more. You

understand we are Christians. I am not going to let all the neighbours say all sorts of things and have us become the laughing stock of everyone. They will wag their tongues and make fun. It was bad enough to have a Hindu daughter-in-law, and now the next generation! People will say such nasty things about us – how will I show my face in society?” Peter’s mother had confronted Dipika squarely, “It is utterly ridiculous that you cannot convert to Christianity because you lack faith in Christ. People around us will not ask whether you are a Believer or not; no one will be interested to know why you changed your religion. I am giving you a month to convert, else you will have to leave the house.” Dipika had tried to reason with her in her sweetest, persuasive way, but Peter’s Mother would have nothing of it. It had only enraged her more and more, and she started wheezing and fuming. Then she had started calling Dipika with the worst possible names, and given her an ultimatum that if she did not do what was expected of her, the door was open and she could walk out. Her eyes had become the colour of a spewing volcano. Her figure had trembled, and her entire body shook, as if an earthquake of magnitude 7-8 had struck on Richter scale. She had focused her bloodshot eyes on Dipika, like a feline which was going to tear its victim into pieces. Dipika had tried to assuage her anger, by telling her not to worry, as everything would be resolved in time. But this had only acted like a spark of fire on a haystack: Peter’s mother had come charging at Dipika like a bull, then and there to tear her apart. But Dipika had stood her grounds, as she always did, when she knew that she was right. She had told Peter’s Mother very firmly that she would never give up her own religion just for the sake of what people thought or said about them. At that, there had been a veritable explosion! Peter’s mother had started

shouting at the top of her voice and pushed Dipika violently towards the door. Peter had tried to stop his Mother, but he knew that she was a psychiatric patient, and on any provocation, she would threaten to end her life. She'd started screaming and complaining that since Peter had brought a wife into the house, he did not care about his mother. Her grievance was that, as Peter had brought Dipika into the family, she had become everything for him. No wonder he was siding with his wife, and even when she deserved to be taught a lesson, he was trying to stop her from throwing her out. She had then ended by saying that, since his wife, whom he had just met a few days ago, meant more to him than his own mother, who had nursed and cared for him all his life, she would take her own life. Peter could then live happily ever after with his Hindu wife. Dipika had rushed out of the house, with Peter behind her. But all of a sudden, he had heard something crashing within the room, and there his mother had been, sprawled out on the floor, with her head against the showcase glass. A shard of glass had gone through her forehead, and she was bleeding profusely. Peter had carried her to the bed with difficulty, with the help of Dipika, who had rushed back. Peter's Mother had become unconscious, and her face had contorted to one side. Dipika had quickly called the Doctor who lived nearby. In the meantime, Dipika had told Peter that she would leave the house immediately, as when his mother regained her senses, she should not see her, otherwise she would be subjected to another episode of a flare-up, which would be definitely detrimental for her. It would not be prudent for her to live under the same roof. Peter had tried to stop her, but his efforts were in vain. Dipika had made up her mind, and once she decided on anything, no amount of reasoning could dissuade her. Peter

had then played his final card and given her the ultimatum: if she left, he would not contact her in the future. She was not considering what he would go through without her, and that would be the end of their happy life together. Dipika, who stood on principles, had felt that Peter's Mother, being a sick and an old lady, should be his priority, and he should be her support in her old age. According to her, in such a situation, they should not think about their own happiness. Not knowing what she would do next, Dipika had merged into the darkness of the night.

Chapter 21

In Dipika's Apartment



Now let us come back to the present day, where Dipika has asked Peter to help her find their baby, who had been kidnapped, but time was short, and their little girl could have fallen into the hands of child traffickers.

As Peter drove the Wagon-R smoothly down the familiar road, it seemed to Dipika that it was taking too long to reach the house. When he had parked the car, she went ahead and opened the door, then took his hand and guided him in. As she pressed the switch, light flooded the room, and a delicately decorated apartment, with a feminine touch, came into view. The first thing he noticed was a photograph on the wall of a baby with her dimpled hands around a very attractive lady. He presumed the child was theirs, and he at once felt the paternal instinct to save and protect her. She did not look like Dipika, but at one glance, one could make out that she was a miniature Peter, the same expression in her eyes, and the same smile! Peter asked Dipika whether she had any recent photographs of the girl. Dipika then took out her album, and there were umpteen photographs of Ritika, each one showing her in a different action. Peter selected one in which all her facial features were prominent.

He said her photograph would be required when they put in an insertion in the papers in the 'Lost Column'. His heart melted with fatherly love when his eyes fell on the rocking horse with its colourful red saddle waiting to ride off with his mistress, the blonde doll, ready to take a walk around the room, and the small cooking utensils, in which their Little Angel must have cooked for her "babies". On the dining table were a few unopened parcels that Dipika must have purchased on her way home from the office. Peter envied the privilege Dipika had, to have had their daughter close to her heart, whereas he himself had deprived himself of the pleasures of parenthood. In a spontaneous gesture of empathy, he stretched out his hand, pulled Dipika into his arms, and assured her that he would leave no stone unturned until they found their little daughter. In his efficient manner then he asked for the details of the governess. He told her that it was imperative to insert the Caregiver's name, and her photograph in the papers. Dipika did not have any problem locating the file, as that very morning she had been going through the details of Mrs. Lombardy, when she did not turn up on time. When Peter saw her photograph, he took an immediate dislike to her. He noted down her phone number and tried to contact her, but for obvious reasons, there was no response. With the two photographs in his possession, Peter was planning to first go to the Police Station to register an FIR about the disappearance of their daughter, but Dipika informed him that she had already done so. But Peter felt the photographs would be more helpful. Then they hurried to the Telegraph Office to put in their two insertions for the next day's publication. Dipika narrated the incident that had led Mrs. Lombardy to Tata Memorial Hospital, where a Good Samaritan had taken Ritika for First Aid when she had fallen from the bus and injured her head. On hearing about the incident, Peter suggested that they should go to Tata Memorial Hospital to find out more about the injury. The

particulars of the injury may help to identify her. Their description of the governess would also assist in the search. Though the staff at the Hospital were very helpful, it seemed that they had a very poor impression of Mrs. Lombardy and felt that she was unfit to take charge of the child as a governess. They had been hesitant to give the lady permission to take away the sobbing child, but their hands were tied when she presented the Letter of Appointment with the parent's signature. Peter noted down that the injury was on the right forehead, just above the eyes. Then they left the hospital with hardly any clue about Ritika's whereabouts, and Dipika's eyes filled with tears, as she buried her face within Peters protecting and comforting arms. His whole body swayed with intense emotion, as if he were inebriated. Passion surged into his manhood, having been denied any expression for many lonesome, stifling months. In his manly fashion, he stroked her hair over and over again. Peter had no idea how to react, being absolutely inexperienced in such a situation, when a woman exposed her fragile inner self, losing her external, false bravado and her show of boldness. With a child-like expression, Dipika turned to Peter and asked him, "What do we do next?" in a tone of implicit confidence in his decision. Peter looked at the pale, anxious face, and his heart churned with love and empathy. With a wry smile, he told Dipika that, as it was late at night, they could not continue the investigation, but they would start again in the morning. Peter dropped her at her residence, but felt as if a part of his flesh was being torn apart from him. He himself went back to his house, so as not to ruffle up his mother into one of her orgies of rage.

Chapter 22

The Search Continues



Despite having a sleepless night, both Peter and Dipika were ready by 7 O'clock. As soon as he knocked at the door, she swung it open with haste. As their eyes met, he pulled her into his arms, kissed her tenderly, and assured her that within the next few hours, they would definitely find Ritika. He surmised that in the short span of time, Ritika could not have been taken very far. They planned to go first to the orphanage run by the Sisters of the Poor, which was within two kilometres. As the car sped noiselessly across the smooth, tarred road, a gigantic white arch came into view. They stopped at the closed silver gate. On both sides of the arch were statues of angels holding the hands of a small child, or Baby Jesus. They had to press a button or a calling bell for the gatekeeper to let them in. A complicated procedure had to be completed to gain entry. They had to write their names, addresses, and businesses in a register given to them by the Security Guard. It was taken to the office, and only if their entry was sanctioned could they proceed. The atmosphere all around was one of peace and tranquillity. The main building was surrounded by lush,

green foliage. A gardener was spraying jets of water on the flower beds, dotted with multi-coloured flowers. From one of the towering trees, the lively chirping of birds could be heard. A nun in a white starched dress came to guide them to the office. An elderly Sister, or Nun, was sitting at the writing table, with a computer in front of her. On the wall was an enlarged picture of Mother Teresa, embracing a child. The Sister looked up and gave them a warm, welcoming smile and enquired why they had come. She spoke with a foreign accent. Dipika rushed through her story, and informed the Sister-in-Charge that she had come to look for her lost child. The Sister listened to her story with patience and was most sympathetic. She confirmed that a little girl had indeed been brought in the previous day, but had been sent to another branch in Malda, as some of the children in their orphanage had contracted COVID-19. Dipika's head reeled as if somebody had delivered a deathly blow. Peter then took out Ritika's photograph and asked the Sister whether the child looked like the one in the snapshot. The Sister looked steadily at the picture for a long time, then shook her head in dismay, as she could not remember the face, and could not be of any help to them. With his head bent in deep thoughts, Peter left the room with Dipika dejectedly following him.

Chapter 23

On the way to Malda



Dipika, with a heavy heart, got into Peter's car. With every impediment, blood rushed to her head, and her body started to tremble with agitation. The thought of her little baby crying her heart out was nearly turning her mad. She would be frightened, and wanting her mother. The delay was nerve-wracking. Peter, in the meantime, was studying the GPS to take the shortest route. He was finding it difficult to concentrate, as he was equally disturbed. The way out of Kolkata took a very long time, as there was a lot of congestion and traffic snarls. Dipika, in her usual manner, clasped and unclasped her hands, expressing impatience and anxiety. Once they were out of the city, the car ran smoothly on the tarred road till they reached Kolaghat. As luck would have it, there was a traffic obstruction, as a government bus had run over an eight-year-old child, who was on his way to school. The irate mob had taken the law into their own hands, had pulled the driver out of his seat, and had showered blows and kicks on him, leaving him half-dead. Congealed blood stained the road, with slippers and torn bits of garments scattered here and there. Not satisfied, they

had then set the bus to flames. Smoke was still spiralling up from the burning mass of fibre, metal, and wood. The police had cordoned off the area for some time. For three hours, all traffic had come to a standstill till the Police were able to regularise the situation. When at long last they reach Malda, Dipika breathed a sigh of relief at the Orphanage belonging to the Sisters of the Poor.

Chapter 24

The Orphanage



The Orphanage was not as imposing or impressive as the one in Kolkata. As they got out of the car, a uniform-clad security guard gave them a welcoming salute. Peter told him that they wanted to see the Rev. Sister. He bowed politely and went in. Shortly, he came back again and ushered them to the Office Room. A diminutive figure sat at the table, which was loaded with heaps of files. She must have been in her seventies. One could make out that when she was young, she must have been a Beauty, but now her face was shrivelled and lined. The fan overhead seemed to need servicing, for it was hardly giving any breeze and was making a rattling sound. The heat and humidity in the air, had made the nun's skin red and clammy. It seemed that the Sister-in-Charge from Kolkata had already apprised her about their visit. In a very soft tone, she asked them to follow her. She led them to a garden at the back of the building. She informed them that the children were scattered all over the vast area, as it was their recreation time, so Dipika should go round and try to identify her child. A few children were on the slide, whereas some were

on the swing. A caregiver was with the smaller children, pushing them on the merry-go-round. There were peals of laughter as the children ran about, chasing each other. How was Dipika supposed to find Ritika amongst so many children, nearly of the same age?! A thought struck Dipika. If Ritika heard the special song she used to sing for her, she would immediately run to her. Dipika went round the playground singing, but there was no sign of Ritika. The Sister then suggested that they wait another two hours, when it would be time for the infants' lunch, as they would all be lined up to enter the refectory, and Dipika could see all the faces. For a long time that seemed to have no end, Dipika sat praying fervently to the Almighty, so that He would give her back her baby. But when the time came, Dipika was faced with intense disappointment - Ritika was not there!

Chapter 25

A Ray of Hope



Peter put his arms around Dipika, in a gesture to comfort her. Her eyes were brimming with tears. She looked up at Peter, looking helpless, like a boat which has lost its bearing on the high seas, and would sink any moment. Peter tried to raise her spirits by reminding her that when ‘one door closes, another door opens’ and it is only after the darkest hour that one can see the sun rising. Dipika looked at him disconsolately. Peter then, to lift her spirits, said, that all was not lost, as they could search in some other orphanages in Kolkata. At that very moment, Peter’s mobile rang, and both of them got a start, for their minds were concentrating on their immediate problem, as to where else to look for Ritika. They were intent on going through the list of orphanages in Kolkata. When Peter, full of anxiety, picked up the phone, somebody from the other side said that they were from the police department in Siliguri. They had come to know the whereabouts of a very fat and plump lady, who perhaps fitted into the description of the governess. They wanted the couple to go and identify Mrs. Lombardy. Both of them rushed to the Station, as they could not depend on

their car, which had developed engine trouble at the wrong time, for the long journey. As they could not get reservations for their seats, they had to buy ordinary tickets. They waited patiently for the Darjeeling Mail to chug in, and somehow managed to get two seats together. The passengers pushed each other as they rushed in, talked loudly, and argued, and there was absolute chaos. Dipika found it difficult to bear or tolerate, as she was in a disturbed mental state, and the shouting and hullabaloo was grating. She could only visualise her little baby sobbing her heart out. Peter did not talk much, but his one thought was how fast he could find their lost child. On disembarking from the train, they jumped into a taxi and gave the driver the address of the Police Station, where they had been directed to meet the officials. As they entered, the OC-in-Charge got up, and introduced himself. He was a short, diminutive man, but seemed to be courteous and helpful. Peter had put a call through to him on reaching Siliguri, and he was waiting for them. Without losing time, he ushered them to a shabby Waiting room with faded, torn curtains that cut off any semblance of light. A fat lady was seen reclining against the wall, half-asleep, with her mouth open, exposing a set of yellow teeth. When Dipika saw the lady, her spirit plummeted like a boulder from a high precipice. She collapsed into Peter's arms in a pool of tears, for the lady was not Mrs. Lombardy!

Chapter 26

Mrs. Lombardy on the Move



At this juncture, we are curious to know what Mrs. Lombardy actually did with the child when she could not figure out where to deposit her, as she herself had to get away fast from the searching Police. Where was she when Dipika and Peter were looking for her?!

There was a train to Bandel in another fifteen minutes. She remembered that one of her past colleagues had kept her child in an orphanage there, as she was a single mother and could not work in the office with a small child at home. Mrs. Lombardy boarded the train to Bandel, with little Ritika trailing behind. She coaxed the Reverend Mother into accepting Ritika as an inmate, but she had to tell her many fabricated stories. That done, she hurried to the station again, to buy a ticket for Hazaribagh, as many years back she had lived there, and the cost of living was not much. At least there she could live in peace, without getting detected under a pseudonym, and with alteration to her appearance. But her stars were against her. After reaching her destination, as she was rushing to board a bus at Hazaribagh

Station, the stress of the last few hours caused her blood pressure to rise. Additionally, her obese body could not withstand the exertion, and Mrs. Lombardy suffered a major stroke. She collapsed right there and died instantaneously.

Chapter 27

Peter gets a Phone Call



It seemed indeed that though a door had closed on Dipika, another door had opened. At that very moment, there was a phone call for Peter, which was from the Hazaribagh Police Station. They wanted Dipika to identify a dead body. But Dipika was in no mood to oblige. She wanted to find her daughter without any more delay, as her disappearance had indeed become traumatic for her. She felt there was no use in going after the dead, as one who was not living could not give her any information about her daughter. Peter had a difficult time coaxing her to proceed to the Hazaribagh Police Station. Dipika could not waste even a fraction of a second to be with her Little Angel. Peter then reasoned with her, and explained to her the necessity of doing so, as the lady could have had with her documents, which could lead to the whereabouts of the girl. So reluctantly she agreed to accompany Peter to Hazaribagh. They bought tickets by which they could reach the earliest. As soon as they had disembarked, they took a taxi to the Police Station. Here the OC-in-Charge took them first to the morgue. As they uncovered her face, they saw in front of them a grotesque

sight, for blood had congealed and matted her sparse hair and scalp, with a pronounced cut on the left side of her head revealing the raw flesh. Dipika tightened her grip on Peter's hand and muttered under her breath, "O, Lord!" Mrs. Lombardy must have lost her dentures when she fell, as her appearance without them had changed. Her mouth was open, and her eyes looked at them in a fixed, glassy stare. Dipika told the Police Officer that the body was indeed of Mrs. Lombardy. Then the Official opened a locker, and showed them the contents of her bag. There were medicines for blood pressure, one or two bright-coloured lipsticks, a broken hairbrush, money, and a crushed, stained ticket from Bandel to Hazaribagh. The officer told them that when the accident occurred, she was alone and there was no child on the bus. Dipika's head reeled with unbearable, deep, stabbing disappointment, but she somehow steadied herself by holding on to the back of the chair.

Chapter 28

When One Door Closes, Another Door Opens



The Police Official then told Peter that there was no reason to be disheartened as they might be able to trace their daughter, if they went to Bandel. The lady had come from Bandel, without the girl, so they could surmise that she had left the girl at Bandel. But being disappointed so many times, Dipika could hardly collect her courage to go for another ‘goose chase’! According to her, Ritika could have been in the hands of some human traffickers, and the more they delayed by going from one place to another, the greater was the chance of the little girl being sent off to a distant destination. Peter tried to get her spirits up by telling her that she would not have to worry on that count, as the Police were handling the case and had a wide network to arrest the wrongdoers wherever they were, and there was no chance of escape. Peter was her strength and support at this time and convinced her that there was no other option for them but to proceed to Bandel, as they had to do everything possible to find Ritika. They boarded a train to

Bandel, and continued their quest. Using Google Maps, they found only one orphanage tucked away in the city's interior. They had to negotiate through narrow, congested lanes with cycles, autorickshaws, and pedestrians, making smooth driving impossible. Dipika dug her nails into her palm with anxiety. It was taking them more than an hour to reach, and her patience was at an end. As luck would have it, they arrived at the back gate, which was always kept locked, so they had to go around the entire building until they reached the main entrance. The orphanage was surrounded on all sides by a wall which was covered with bougainvillea bushes and colourful flowers. There was a massive gate in front, painted black, with "Holy Child Orphanage" written in bold white letters. Peter remembered that it was the same orphanage where he used to bring Angela to visit her daughter, but the exterior looked different. Much had been done to renovate the building. In addition, the bougainvillea bushes now made the orphanage look more homely. Peter pressed the calling bell, and a nun in a habit came out. She wore a black gown with a white scapular and a black veil. A rosary hung from a chain around her neck. In a very soft tone she asked, why they had come. Peter explained that they had come to find the whereabouts of their missing daughter. She went in, most probably to inform the matter to her Superior. She came back after a few minutes and told them that Mother Superior would be free after some time because she was attending to a sick child. In the meantime, one horrific thought after another was coming to Dipika's mind. "What if Mrs. Lombardy had left the child crying on the streets? She may not have wanted to be bothered by an encumbrance when there was the possibility of police complications, and she had to make her escape fast! What if the child had not

eaten for the last two days, being in a state of panic, having been separated from her mother? What if she were no more, being throttled and disposed of in a garbage bin by the governess, to get rid of any proof of her wrongdoing!' At last, they heard the dignified steps of someone coming down the corridor. Both of them looked up expectantly, but alas, it was one of the maids!

Chapter 29

Interaction with Mother Superior



It was nearly tea time. A tall figure in a nun's habit walked in gracefully. She was extremely beautiful, with a radiance emanating from her face. Though she must have been in her eighties, she seemed to be full of energy. With a warm smile, she extended her hand to the visitors, apologising profusely for keeping them waiting. Dipika narrated in detail the whole story of her missing child. The Mother Superior admitted that a child had indeed been brought in. The lady, who had brought the child, had given her name as Dorothy D'Silva. Dorothy had said that the girl had been abandoned at the Sealdah Station. The girl's mother had kissed her "goodbye" and had told her that she was not able to keep her, as her father had deserted them, and she was penniless, giving instructions that the girl was to go with anyone who wanted to take her. When Dorothy had been seated on a bench at the platform for her train to arrive, the girl had come to her in tears and had asked her if she would take her. Dorothy D'Silva was actually Mrs. Lombardy, who had given a false name to avoid being detected. Mrs. Lombardy had told the nun that she had taken pity on the girl and, as

she herself could not keep her owing to her busy schedule, had brought her to the orphanage. Dipika listened to the whole narrative with a lot of patience, but she only wanted to be taken as quickly as possible, without a second's delay, to find out whether the girl was indeed her Ritika. How she longed to take her Little One in her arms!

Chapter 30

In Mother's Arms



Mother Superior asked them with an inviting smile to follow her. What struck Peter was that despite her age, there was not a trace of tiredness on her countenance. Dipika, with a lot of apprehension and misgivings, followed her silently, clasping and unclasping her fingers in her typical nervous fashion. Peter noticed that on both sides of the corridor there were paintings of nursery rhyme characters, such as Humpty Dumpty, Little Bo Peep, and Little Miss Muffet. He was impressed, recalling that on previous occasions when he had visited the same orphanage, it had looked shabby and uncared for. But the new Mother Superior had tried to make it a liveable home for the children. They crossed a hall where infants were seated in high chairs, and young nuns were helping them to have their quota of fruits. There were teddy bears and dolls also seated on some of the chairs. The babies got their share of juiced fruit in feeding bottles, whilst the older ones had it mashed or whole. Then, as they went further ahead across a hall, they saw rooms with small desks and chairs. Interesting charts with alphabets hung from the walls.

There were blocks with pictures of animals stacked on the small tables and boxes full of colourful beads for counting. It seemed that the children's education was also taken care of. The classrooms opened out into the playground at the back of the building. They could see colourful appliances kept for the children's amusement and entertainment. There were swings, merry-go-rounds, rocking horses, slides, and ladders for climbing. They heard a lot of excited screaming and shouting from a group of children having fun. They were absolutely engrossed in their game of Hide-and-seek. Dipika strained her eyes to see if she could spot her "Curly Locks". As the visitors approached, the children's attention was diverted towards them. All of a sudden, one of the girls gave a loud shout, "Mummy!" The child ran towards them. Dipika ran to her, and mother and child were locked in a close embrace. Dipika felt that there could not be any greater happiness in the world. Peter looked on with satisfaction, overwhelmed with paternal love.

The End

