A black silhouette of a woman with long, flowing hair, captured in a mid-air jumping or dancing pose. She is set against a background of soft, glowing light rays and scattered white sparkles. The title text is overlaid on this scene.

*The
Lights
That
Find Us*

A NOVEL

ANITTHA THANABALAN

THE
LIGHTS
THAT
FIND US

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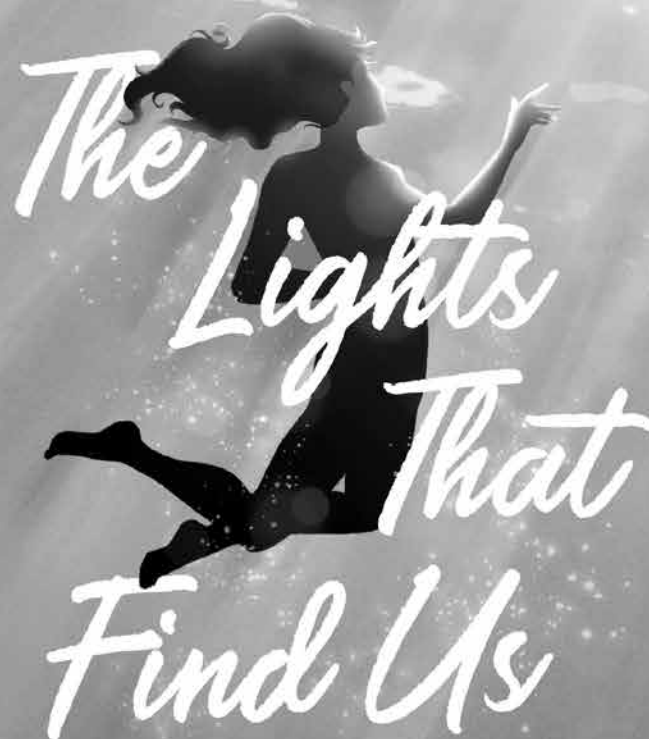
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ANITTHA THANABALAN



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

*For anyone who believes in or yearns for
the freedom that healing can bring;
for everyone going through their own
seemingly insurmountable mistakes.*

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chapter 1

DEEPAVALI 2018

SHREYA JERKED UP in bed. A series of crashes, clangs and cries had rudely awoken her out of what had been a much-needed snooze fest. After throwing off the heavy duvet with some difficulty because Janaki, the middle-aged domestic worker who had helped raise her, always tucked the corners tight under the mattress, Shreya stumbled towards the door. It was barely 4am.

Holding her breath, she gently cracked it open. Light spilled into her room from the chandelier that hung above the stairwell, and the almost-too-sweet scent of frying jalebis invaded her nostrils, filling her slightly-parched mouth with saliva. From the sound of the sizzling oil, she could tell that Paatti, Amma and Janaki had just started making the jalebis. Amma was clucking her tongue and chiding Janaki for dropping a tray of metal tumblers.

Shreya tiptoed out into the hall and leaned forward over the immaculately polished wooden banister, straining to listen and imagining what the kitchen must look like two floors below. She could almost see Amma, in a rumpled T-shirt and her favourite

red cotton shorts, sitting on the floor, elbow deep in murruku dough, kneading it with all her might so that the murrukus would be light and airy. Then she would begin sectioning them off, pushing them into the heavy silver murruku maker her father had made for her first Deepavali as a married woman. It was older than Shreya and a gift that Amma treasured reverently. It came out only on special Indian occasions, with Deepavali being the crown jewel. It spent the rest of the year encased in a box with a thick velvet interior and was tucked away in a cupboard, patiently waiting to be used again.

Her grandmother would be manning the stove in the same blue sari she wore whenever she was preparing a feast for the family. Paatti had once told Shreya that the difference between a great cook and a novice was love; she had been cooking since she could reach the stove, and everything she touched in the kitchen tasted, smelled and even felt amazing. In fact, when Paatti had turned twelve, her mother turned the kitchen over to her talented daughter and then used all that free time to tend to the garden she had cultivated single-handedly. Shreya once asked her how she consistently produced such incredible food. Paatti had simply told her that food was almost like a meditative experience for her. That when she was cooking, all she thought about was the dish in front of her. Nothing else was allowed to enter her mind and disrupt the dish she was building. It was also the reason why Paatti never cooked when she was upset—she did not want those feelings to be transferred to the food. Hearing her call out to Janaki to massage the spices into the mutton, Shreya felt a wave of relief wash over her. In recent years, as the festive season approached, Paatti withdrew more into herself. She would avoid the kitchen till she could stand being away no longer and then the act of cooking would snap her out of her brooding. Where artists needed canvas and paint to express themselves, Paatti needed her stove and ingredients.

Janaki had long since been inducted into the family. She had seen Shreya and her older brother through school, and had been there for every up and down the family had experienced. She knew everything that was happening within the family and had a way of tactfully offering bits of advice at exactly the right moment before moving on to whatever the next household task at hand was. Her patience and advice had become such a constant in Shreya's life that she had learnt that the best time to speak to Janaki was when she was hanging up the washing. It was a simple enough job that Janaki didn't need much concentration and Shreya didn't feel like she was interrupting her at an extremely inconvenient time. Plus, there was no extraneous sound from a cooker hood or a vacuum cleaner to work around.

The strong aroma of onions mixed with cardamom hit Shreya square in the nose. Before she could suppress it, a powerful sneeze erupted out of her, forcing her eyes shut and echoing down the stairwell. There was a pause in the kitchen.

"Shreya?" Amma called.

Quickly moving backwards, Shreya slipped into her dark room and closed the door firmly. She wasn't ready to face Deepavali just yet.

★

"Shreya! It's time to get up," Mr Ramachandran said as he threw his daughter's door open without bothering to knock. "It's Deepavali morning, you know. Time for breakfast. Our relatives will be here soon and I don't want them thinking I raised a lazy girl who sleeps through sunrise on Deepavali. Even worse, she doesn't help in the kitchen or anywhere else. What will they think? Get up, get up." He stormed over to the windows and yanked the curtains open. Light poured into the dark room.

"Deepavali is the festival of *lights*, Shreya. You've been

celebrating Deepavali for sixteen years. I should not have to tell you that welcoming light into the home is necessary.” He waited for signs of life. Her groggy murmuring must have been enough for him because he left the room mumbling under his breath and slamming the door behind him.

Back in bed, Shreya poked her head out of the mess of comforters, hair covering half her face. She silently counted under her breath. Four counts later, she heard her father thunder down the stairs.

That’s not too bad, Shreya thought. He didn’t linger outside Dhiren’s room too long today.

A few months ago, in the middle of a weekday afternoon, Shreya had come home early with a bad case of the flu. Paatti was out with Janaki and some relatives, and the house was silent. She had assumed that she was alone.

But when she got to the landing on the second floor, she realised her father was home too. He was standing facing Dhiren’s door, still in his business attire, his usually ramrod straight posture sagging. Shreya had not known what to do. She had stood there, wondering if she should continue up to her room or make herself scarce. Suddenly becoming aware of her presence, her father shook his head and headed down the stairs towards her, mumbling something about seeing her at dinner.

They had never spoken about it.

It was one of several things that they never spoke about now.

In her room, Shreya cracked her eyelids open. She rolled over, kicking at the duvet to get it off. She really had to tell Janaki to relax with the duvet tucking. It made getting out of bed harder than it already was. With a final grunt and jerk, she threw it off. She stretched out on her bed, bending different joints and letting out a satisfied “Oof” whenever something popped and clicked, releasing the tension that she had built up through the night.

The intrusive scent of butter thosais and the sounds of cheery

Tamil pop music snaked in from under her door. She shut her eyes tight and blocked it out, dreading the onslaught of the day. But the aroma and the sounds seemed to demand more and more of her attention, and in desperation she fled to her bathroom. Once safely barricaded in there, she lit candles to combat the thosais and played Beyoncé in retaliation to AR Rahman.

She focused all her attention on pouring out the bath salts and adding her favourite bath bomb. She dreaded what was to come, and envisioning it in her head was just too much. But in here, it was just her and the water and the soaps. A little escape from the forced revelry building downstairs. In here, there was no Deepavali or its ugly reminders of Deepavalis past. Stripping down, she eased herself into the hot water, letting out a satisfied moan as the water burned and then soothed.

On the wall to the right of the tub were shelves. Each shelf contained various half-filled shampoos, conditioners and exfoliating scrubs. Shreya had a hard time resisting new bath products. She was prone to extreme excitement about each new one before getting bored with the same scents and experience halfway to completion. Her bath spending habits had become somewhat of a joke within the family and her older brother had nicknamed her Bed, Bath and Beyond Waste. She giggled at the memory and then blanched inwardly, remembering that he wasn’t going to be at this Deepavali either.

What number are we at now? Two...this will be the second Deepavali without Dhiren. I don’t think I can take much more of this. I wonder if Appa and Amma will be willing to convert to another religion... I should look into hypnotism...

Shreya’s thoughts trailed off. The reality of the day was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, beating on the bathroom door with both fists. For a few minutes, she sat absolutely still in the water, taking deep calming breaths and trying to stop the memories and images that flooded her mind. Clamping a hand over her

mouth and squeezing her eyes shut, she resisted the urge to sob. She had done enough of that to know that once she started, it was almost impossible to stop. She stayed that way, body tense and eyes closed, till the water grew cold and her skin started to pucker.

Shreya pulled her knees to her chest and exhaled. She exclaimed in surprise when her right hand sank into something thick, wet and slimy. It was oil. The bottom shelf held a silver tray with two small silver bowls. The bowl farthest away was filled with oil and the other was a pasty scrub—green gram flour mixed with turmeric and various other powders. It was a traditional Hindu custom to have an oil bath before dawn on Deepavali morning. Shreya stared at the little piece of ceremony that had infiltrated her bathroom.

When they were much younger, Shreya and Dhiren would get dragged out of their beds by Paatti at five in the morning. She would then proceed to give them a thorough oil bath, ignoring their cries when she doused them in cold water. The whole procedure would last about an hour. At the end of it, she and Dhiren would be squeaky clean and at least four shades lighter. Then, and only when she was completely happy with her work and they were dressed in that year's jipa and pavadai, Paatti would kiss them both on the cheek and wish them Happy Deepavali.

Getting carefully out of the tub, Shreya picked up the silver bowls and calmly poured all the contents down the toilet, careful to rinse off any indication that such a thing had been done.

★

“Finally,” Mr Ramachandran said. “I was starting to think you were planning on sleeping through the day.”

If only that was a possibility.

Shreya descended the last few steps and offered him a wry smile. The big wooden grandfather clock showed that it was almost ten.

She felt a little guilty. She hadn't done a single thing to help this year. Not with the food nor the decorations.

“Sorry, Appa,” she started softly.

But her father cut her off, shaking his head irritably. “Never mind, never mind. Go wish Amma and Paatti. They were up before the sun while you were snoring away.”

Not bothering to inform him of her spying last night, she directed herself into the kitchen, tugging at the end of the brand new, bright blue sari that draped over her shoulder. It wasn't hanging down far enough and came to a stop awkwardly just below her elbow.

For the amount of work that had been happening the night before and early this morning, the kitchen was surprisingly spotless. It looked like Janaki had gone over the entire room with a toothbrush, cleaning it to perfection so that not even the gaps between the tiles would be an embarrassment when the guests came by. The cabinets looked like they had been polished. The countertops must have been wiped down several times and the taps and windows gleamed as if they were just installed. The gold bangles and tastefully jewelled earrings that adorned the wrists and ears of Amma and Paatti reflected off the countertops. It created little sparkle effects around the room, making the walls sparkle and shimmer.

The black surface of the island in the middle of the kitchen was barely visible. It was covered by ten huge steaming pots, containers and aluminium trays, each holding a different dish just for breakfast alone. In the ovens and on the stove, curries, sambar and sambals that would be served during dinner bubbled away. Underneath the spicy smells, Shreya detected the sweet scent of paayasam.

Amma was inspecting her famous murrucus as they cooled on a rack. Paatti was gently blotting the butter thosais, removing excess butter and ghee. Janaki was bustling around the kitchen,

pulling out the special Deepavali plates and silverware. The kitchen was still a hive of activity. There would be no end to it till the next morning. Then for the next four days, the kitchen and stoves would remain untouched as Shreya and her family ate their way through the leftovers. No matter how many people came, Paatti and Amma always insisted on cooking the same amount of food, somehow having made themselves believe that twenty people ate as much as forty.

No one had looked up at Shreya yet. If her presence or assistance had been missed, there were certainly no signs of it.

“Happy Deepavali, everyone,” she said, forcing the words.

Three pairs of eyes looked at her.

“Happy Deepavali, ma,” Amma responded with a smile.

Paatti walked over to Shreya. She spied the improperly wrapped sari and clucked her tongue. Her silvery eyebrows came together in almost a perfect line as she bemoaned the state of her granddaughter’s dressing.

“Look at what this girl has done! About to finish secondary school but still! Still she cannot tie her sari. Come here quick,” Paatti instructed. Shreya smiled sheepishly.

Paatti pulled her into the laundry room. When she was satisfied that no one would notice, she began adjusting and readjusting Shreya’s sari until it sat on her just right.

“Good thing your father didn’t notice. There would have been no end to it then,” she said. “There, now you look perfect.” She kissed Shreya on the cheek and wished her Happy Deepavali in Tamil, making her start to ache all over again for the Deepavalis of before. Shreya quickly quashed the feeling, directing her attention elsewhere.

“Amma. Is there anything that you need me to do?”

Amma looked up at her thoughtfully. Shreya realised that apart from the jewellery she was wearing, her mother hadn’t put in much effort for the day. She was wearing the same sari she had

worn last year and almost no make-up.

Normally, she would have asked Amma, a woman who loved dressing up and was a part-time makeup artist to boot, why she had kept things so simple this year. But she was afraid of the answer. More importantly, she didn’t want to cause her mother any more pain with probing questions and distressing reminders.

“Could you set up the palagaram trays?” Amma said, cutting through her daughter’s thoughts. “The guests always seem to devour those first. You know where all the sweets are.”

Shreya nodded and sprang into action. Keeping her hands and mind busy was exactly what she needed. Carefully, she wiped the trays and the serving dishes, making sure there wasn’t a drop of water anywhere. Next she arranged the jalebis, murrukus, kaesaris, ladoos, barfis, pineapple tarts, chocolate muffins and all the rest in sets of four, aligning them as neatly as possible but ensuring they didn’t overlap so much that they became difficult to extricate. She carried the tray to the biggest coffee table in the living room, then she hustled back into the kitchen and collected the little dishes that the guests would use. She stacked them neatly, arranging the napkins and cutlery just so next to them. Her sari kept getting in the way of all this hustling and bustling. In annoyance, she tugged at it every now and then, trying to find some extra give. The oil lamps that burned merrily away throughout the house made it warmer than usual, and Shreya was afraid that her make-up would come sliding off and join the sweets in the tray. The ceiling fans would extinguish everything at once, so she decided to turn on as many air-conditioners as she could.

She jingled as she walked through the house; her kolusu, the little gold anklets with the bells, gaily announced her every movement. Methodically, she went through the large three-storey bungalow her father had bought nine years ago when he had been promoted to CFO at his company. She turned on every unit in every room, leaving each door open behind her before tinkling

on to the next.

Singapore's weather's bad enough. Add a hundred oil lamps and we may as well slather ourselves in ghee and roll onto a serving dish.

She reached the top floor and did the same with her room. Then she turned and faced the last door in the house. Her brother's room. She turned the doorknob, and let go, allowing the door to swing open on its own.

Dhiren had always been a voracious reader. Consuming books at the same rate Shreya consumed chocolate. She ran a finger along the spines as she went around the room, wondering which books had occupied the few gaps in the shelves. The queen-sized bed still had fresh sheets, which meant that Janaki was still coming in here to clean. His cupboard was bare except for a few jipias and old sweatshirts. His track and field and football medals hung off the window bars, gently clinking against one another. He had always been an overachiever. Excelling at sports and academics as his little sister stumbled along behind him, trying to carve a space for herself in the world.

Shreya picked up the photo frame on his desk and sat down on the edge of his bed; it was a picture of the two of them. Dhiren appeared to be around twenty, with an intense look of concentration on his face as he plaited her long thick hair; Shreya wore a grimace that resembled acute pain. He had entered a series of contests held by the neighbourhood for Racial Harmony Day, eager to win the prize of a hundred dollars of food vouchers from various eateries. On top of having to know the rules of five-stone, being able to identify various ethnic foods and knowing some basic phrases from the other cultures, hair-plaiting had shown up on the event schedule. So, every day for a week, Shreya had fidgeted impatiently for thirty minutes as her brother tried to decipher the mechanics of engineering the perfect plait. She had figured that he would surely struggle with this and possibly mess it up royally, but to her never-ending annoyance, Dhiren had

gotten the hang of it in three days and mastered it by the fifth. In fact, he moved on to more complex braiding techniques such as five-strand styles and even a fishtail braid. Her father had been a tad unsettled by the idea of his eldest son plaiting hair, but her mother had waved off all his objections, saying that it was a handy skill to have once he had his own daughters.

Shreya had simply been annoyed that her brother once again outshone her. Thinking back to that moment now, she felt nothing but shame. If Dhiren were to come back, she would sit still for him for hours without complaint and happily let him outshine her in every area. She closed her eyes, wishing fervently that such simple childish promises worked.

She spotted the remote control on the side table and shut the windows before turning the air-conditioning on. She placed the picture back on his desk, remembering that he had once said it was his favourite photograph of the two of them.

From down below, the doorbell sounded and volleys of "Happy Deepavali!" echoed from outside and then from within. The front door banged open and her father could be heard with his own loud welcome. There were "ooohs" and "aaahs" amongst the other comments on the decorations, the clothes and the food.

Shreya looked back at her brother's room and silently wished him, imagining that he was standing in front of her. Then she took a deep breath, descended the stairs and was promptly engulfed by a sea of colourfully attired relatives.

★

"So, Shreya. I heard you did really well for your prelims," Uncle Ravi said. He was her father's oldest brother and used his seniority to constantly question his nieces and nephews about every aspect of their lives, though he had never really taken any interest in Shreya's life until recently. Regardless, these snooping habits had

forced the same nieces and nephews to refer to him as Uncle Snoopy behind his back.

“Yes, Uncle Snoo— I mean, Uncle Ravi.”

“Good! Good! Very proud of you,” he said beaming at her and waving a piece of curry-soaked thosai in her direction. The cousin sitting next to him got out of his way hastily, not wanting curry flecks on his trendy jipa.

“Thanks...” Shreya said, trailing off.

“So, what’s next? Amma was saying something about you going overseas to study? Maybe even right after the O-Levels. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea for a young woman like yourself? You’ve never lived away from home. What if you’re not able to cope there?”

Shreya didn’t answer, choosing instead to turn eating her thosai into performance art. She opened her eyes wide and chewed slowly with exaggerated motions, even making a few lip-smacking sounds. Anything to indicate that her mouth was otherwise occupied.

She had never understood why a full cross-examination was seen as appropriate Deepavali conversation. Shouldn’t the day be full of love, laughter and light? It was a ceremony for Christ’s sake. Or would that be Krishna’s sake?

“Well?” Uncle Ravi prodded.

“Answer, Shreya. Don’t be rude,” Appa snapped at her, his eyes glittering like little beetles under the thick bushy eyebrows that had gone a lot whiter over the past three years.

Thankfully, Paatti came to her rescue. “Leave the poor child alone,” she scolded as she doled mutton curry on top of their heaping plates of thosai and idly. “Eat now. Scare your children and nieces half to death later.”

Uncle Ravi and Appa pounced on the freshly served mutton

curry. Soon they were too busy stuffing their moustachioed faces to offer any more comments and questions. Shreya breathed a sigh of relief, making a mental note of that moment as the first interrogation of the day.

The house was full of chatter. The oil lamps burned brightly. The decorative banners and pictures covered almost every wall, making it impossible for anyone to take a good Instagram picture. Cousins commented on the intricacy of each other’s henna, first asking where they had them done and then how much they had paid. The winner of the best henna was always determined by a complex algorithm of price-point and design. The younger children were playing with mattappu on the back porch, whirling the sparklers round and round to see who could make the biggest split-second colourful circles. Janaki came hurrying out with a pail of water, imploring the children to be careful and to throw their burnt-out sparklers into the pail when they were done. In the living room, Shreya’s teenaged cousins scrolled through social media together, commenting loudly on the lack of proper lighting and insane number of filters on some pictures and marvelling at the styling skills of others. Amma, Paatti and her aunts were in the kitchen eating, cooking and gossiping. Occasionally, they would comment on a particularly well chosen sari, earring or necklace, reaching out to finger the item in question. Appa, his brothers and brothers-in-law sat in front of the TV with an assortment of beers, whiskey and the occasional Coca-Cola, talking and laughing while watching and sipping. To the casual observer, it might have seemed like a typical Deepavali family gathering and celebration.

But Shreya could sense the little pulse of unhappiness that underlined the day’s event. It was evident in the way her mother’s eyes wandered and misted over as if she wasn’t really there, only coming back to the present when a question was directed at her. It was in the set of her father’s jaw and in the way his eyes repeatedly passed over the spot where the family portrait had once hung.

She could see it in the now usual heaviness of Paatti's gait, still unused to her oldest grandson's absence. Even in Janaki's demeanour, which was not quite as chatty and playful as usual.

Shreya had initially thought that each year which passed after Dhiren's departure would dim the memories and dull the pain. That *this* year it would be different. That *this* year she could really let herself enjoy everyone getting dressed up, eating as if it were their last day on Earth and talking well into the wee hours of the morning.

But things had only gotten worse. The usual splendour of the house had dimmed and its occupants—try as they might—had become less engaging, drifting from conversation to conversation, unexpectedly snapping out of personal reveries before diving back into them the moment they were left alone. It was as if the house and all its inhabitants were suffering under a terrible weight.

Unable to stand the looks of pain on her family's faces any more, Shreya collected the dirty cutlery and crockery, carrying it all into the kitchen. She gently pushed her way through the gaggle of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. Ignoring the two dishwashers attentively waiting to be used, she lowered everything into the deep sink.

"Your pallu will get dirty if you leave it like that," Janaki said from behind her.

"Oh. Right. Thanks," Shreya said, tucking the end that draped over her shoulder around her waist and into the waistband on the other side. Then she removed the two bangles on her wrist, putting them aside so they wouldn't get wet.

"Better," Janaki said approvingly.

"I'm going to need another half-litre of oil to get them back on later," Shreya said, going for humour. She received a small smile in return.

For a while they stood side by side, silently rinsing, soaping and washing off the utensils, plates and cups. In a few minutes,

they fell into a simple efficient rhythm. Neither asked why the other chose to wash everything by hand when there were two dishwashers available.

Janaki broke the silence. "How are you feeling?"

Knowing exactly what she was talking about, Shreya sighed and said, "Empty. I feel empty."

"Yes, I know. I miss him too. He should be here. Each year, I think the same thing. That no matter what, family should be together on Deepavali. These occasions are made special with everyone's presence. Even though your family has been so good to me, it still makes me sad that I am not with my own; but I am only apart from mine because of work and distance. But this... this is not good, Shreya."

"It's not his fault. It's not anyone's fault. It's not something that can be faulted," Shreya said a little more sharply than she intended.

Janaki looked at her. Shreya was expecting anger but all she saw was compassion. "Not *that*, ma. You misunderstand me. I'm talking about the light in the home. Every home carries a light that is nurtured and built through the years. Laughter adds to it. Joy adds to it. Good food. Good people. And love, ma. Love adds to it. That light is meant to..." Here Janaki paused, gesticulating with her hands, pushing against some unseen force. She continued, "To move, take away the darkness. To keep away the heartache."

Resting both palms on the sink, she bowed her head, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. Shreya wrapped her arms around Janaki, hugging her close. The petite woman shuddered once in sorrow and then hastily ran a hand over her cheeks. She turned to Shreya and grasped her hands, looking her straight in the eye.

"Shreya, ma. I have seen it in my village. It doesn't matter if the home belongs to a rich man, a poor man, a young couple or a widow. Once the light starts dimming, the darkness creeps in. And the people who live there...they're just not at peace any

more. No matter what they do, no matter where they go. There is no peace. And I fear the same will come to this house. There is too much sadness in everyone and not enough joy. Darkness, misery, it breeds more of the same. I can taste it in the air. Sometimes it feels suffocating.”

“I...I don't know what to do, Janaki. I don't know how to be anything but sad or angry or hurt. I did such a horrible, shameful thing.”

Janaki lifted Shreya's chin, meeting her eyes. “We all do horrible, shameful things, ma. It is in our very nature. We forget that there are other ways to do things...other ways to act. We forget this and we take the most obvious, reactive way.”

Shreya couldn't bear to hold eye contact any longer. Those big brown eyes seemed to be looking straight into her soul, leaving her every reprehensible thought and action exposed. She turned back to the sink, letting her tears fall onto the last few dirty dishes to carve a clear track through the grime. She wished it was that simple, that her tears could wash away the memories and the wounds of the past. But instead, they had lodged firmly in her mind and in her life, like barnacles on the hull of a ship. If only life was as easy to fix as washing a pile of dirty dishes.

“I know. I know. I chose wrong.”

“Yes. But that doesn't mean it has to stay wrong. Your regret and your sorrow is your humanity and your love, Shreya. Shining brightly. If you didn't care about what you said or did, you wouldn't be feeling this way. But I don't want you to feel like this forever. I miss my happy girl as much as I miss my Dhiren.”

“I wish I could take everything back. I wish it was him here and not me. I can't stand watching how I've torn my family apart...”

“You're not quite that powerful, ma. It takes much more than just you to break a family.”

“It doesn't feel like it.”

“You are young, still. Young enough to learn fast and grow

quick. You can change the feeling in the house...bring joy back to us.”

Shreya stared at the other woman, her expression twisted in confusion. Before Janaki could respond, Shreya heard her mother hollering from the back porch. “Janaki! The children set the rose bush on fire! Quick! Quick! Get the hose!”

Janaki's look of mortification broke the spell of conversation between them.

“Go,” Shreya said. “Before Amma adds the kids to the fire for ruining those bushes.”

Everyone made a beeline for the back porch and the garden, yelling out various instructions that were best for smothering flames. No one noticed Shreya sinking to the floor of the kitchen in a pool of blue silky material. She rested her head on her knees and sobbed quietly, praying that the day would just hurry up and come to an end.



“I've had those rose bushes for as long as we've been in this house,” Amma lamented to her sisters and sister-in-laws. “Almost ten years. What a pity.”

“Those children should have been watched. They got too excited,” an aunt quipped.

“Eh! Ganesh! Lavenya! Vignesh! Come apologise to your aunt. You upset her tremendously,” another sari-clad aunt called out from the middle of the group that had gathered around Shreya's mother in sympathy.

Three adorable guilt-stricken children emerged from behind a sofa with tear-stained cheeks, their woebegone expressions instantly pulling at the heartstrings of everyone present. Movement restricted in their finery, they walked slowly and clumsily over to their aunt. The youngest one, Lavenya, was pushed forward by

the other two. Rubbing a bangle-covered arm over her eyes, she started with “I-I-I’m *sorry*,” and then promptly burst into tears.

Shreya watched her mother jump off the high stool and scoop the child up. “It’s okay, ma. Shhh. Shhhh. Stop crying. It’s Deepavali. Don’t cry. I know you didn’t do it on purpose.” The child laid her head down on the older woman’s shoulder and continued sobbing. The two boys looked relieved. Their strategy of combatting a scolding with adorableness had succeeded.

“Yah,” a plump aunt chortled. “They’re just children. What do they know? The wind probably carried a spark and threw it on the bushes.”

“Exactly. Where was Janaki? Shouldn’t she have been watching them?” a pregnant cousin asked as she massaged her swollen ankles.

“How much work do you expect her to do? It’s her Deepavali too,” Paatti said pointedly. Before anyone could respond, Uncle Ravi’s wife, Auntie Bhairavi, came in to announce that it was high time for the blessings.

Auntie Bhairavi was as beautiful as her husband was nosy. She carried herself with a grace and elegance that had never wavered even in the most trying of times. She helped to arrange the children from youngest to oldest, and the blessing ceremony started.

Lavenya—now tear-free and smiling quite happily again—got down on her knees and touched her hands and her forehead to the floor in front of the large altar, giving thanks to the gods and receiving aseervatham. Then she did the same with Paatti. All the elders smudged a small amount of kumkuma on her forehead. Apart from getting their blessings, she also received a colourful little envelope of money from each of them. She clutched the small packets in her even smaller fists as she went down the line. Lavenya might not have been able to count—in a linear fashion, at least—but she knew the money she had been given would buy plenty of sweets.

Shreya giggled at the look of delight on her youngest cousin’s

face. After the blessings, Lavenya had waddled over to the staircase and spread all the envelopes in front of her; she was trying to open them from the middle. Hurrying over, Shreya said, “Hey, cutie. If you tear them like that, you might rip the money too.”

Lavenya looked horrified at this. “What do I do?” she whispered.

“I’ll tell you what,” Shreya said, squatting down in front of her so that they were at eye-level. “Why don’t we put all of that in my purse here and after I’m done getting my blessings, we’ll both go up to my room and count your money together, okay?”

“Amma said it’s rude to count the money in someone else’s home,” Lavenya said guiltily, likely remembering what her mother had told her repeatedly while wagging her finger on the drive over.

“Well then, it will be our little secret,” Shreya said, holding out her pinkie. Lavenya smiled gleefully and tried to wrap her tiny pinkie around the much larger one. They both giggled again.

“Come, Shreya. It’s your turn,” Uncle Ravi called.

Shreya handed her purse to Lavenya. “Hold on to this, cutie.”

The Hindu gods Vinayagar, Krishna and Perumal stared out quite sternly from their frames on the altar. Their pictures had been wiped clean, and fresh garlands of flowers were hung along the edges of the frames. In the middle of each picture near the top, there were circular rounds of yellow and red powder mixed together, and offerings were laid out in shiny silver trays before them. On one tray, there were bananas, grapes and apples; on another, oranges, pears and kiwis; another, palagaram; yet another, some jewellery Shreya had never seen before; and on the final tray were draped colourful saris and white dhotis. The sacred fire burnt strongly in front of them, releasing a little spire of black smoke at the very end of the flame. The scent of sandalwood incense gently wafted over everything.

This was Shreya’s favourite part of Deepavali. Though some might think it archaic, having to touch the feet of their elders

for blessings gave her a strong sense of tradition. And now, when everything was different, Shreya clung to tradition. For as long as she could remember, she and Dhiren did this bit together, offering their thanks and prayers to the Hindu gods simultaneously. Dhiren would lie prone next to her and she would bow with knees bent, both their hands and their foreheads on the floor.

Now, lowering herself to the same spot like all the years before, Shreya felt his absence stronger than ever. She missed having him next to her and hearing him mutter his prayers under his breath. She hated being the last one to receive blessings now. That had always been Dhiren's place. It irked her that no one spoke or asked about him, that no one else seemed to miss him as keenly as she did. It was almost as if he was a figment of their collective imaginations. There every day till he was just gone, erased from every picture and all family history. And it was all her fault. The thought that he would never again be here with her for this annual tradition, that she might forever be the last one to go down this line, sent her spiralling.

Tears flowed freely from her eyes. She didn't bother to stop or hide them. She could sense the confusion in the room as everyone started to wonder why she didn't move on. She could feel her grandmother's hands on her face, trying to push aside the hair that had fallen over. She could hear her mother saying something and the sound of her father's feet as he marched over to her. She ignored them all, blocking everything out. Her hands and forehead still firmly glued to the floor, she imagined Dhiren, tall and handsome as always, walking down the stairs from his room as if nothing had happened, getting slapped on the back for doing yet another incredible thing. She pictured the look of happiness and joy in the eyes of her parents. Imagined Paatti reaching out to hug them both together. Saw Janaki swat his hand away from the food as he tried to sneak something from the kitchen before mealtime.

Sweat broke out along her forehead and then her back. Her teeth clenched with the effort of her concentration. Shreya willed her prayer into the space before her and out into the universe, somehow knowing that this amount of energy would not go unnoticed:

Please bring him back to me, please bring him back to me, please bring him back to me.

Over and over and over again, Shreya repeated these words, until she was almost screaming them in her head, seeing the words leak out of her brain and fill the gap between her and the altar.

"Please," she choked. Then she passed out.

chapter 2

L I M B O

URGH. WHAT AM I lying on... is that my arm? Why's my face wet?

Shreya became aware of the floor and the pool of saliva that had gathered right next to her mouth. The marble was hard underneath her and her body was in a ball, trying to keep the uncomfortable clammy coldness at bay. She was definitely still in front of the altar, though she didn't know why. It felt like a lot of time had passed. The faint smell of incense and pungent aroma of flowers still hung in the air. Light probed the corners of her closed eyes. She lifted a heavy hand and wiped at her mouth.

She waited for her body to slowly regain blood flow. She wiggled her toes and tried to gently clear her dry throat. Her desire for getting off the cold floor battled her desire to pretend to stay asleep. She could tell that there was someone else in the room with her, probably either her grandmother or mother. She didn't want to face them and explain what had happened.

I probably made an epic fool of myself. I wonder how they explained it away? And why did they just leave—

“Don't worry. I got to you before they had to explain anything. Although I don't see how anyone could have talked their way out of that. You did make quite a spectacle of yourself. Gave everyone

there quite the scare, especially the little one.”

Shreya bolted upright, nearly spraining her neck and getting a stitch in her side. The voice belonged to a stranger.

“Who's there?” she called, trying to mask the fear in her voice. Slowly, she clambered to her feet, tugging and yanking the sari into place as she stood.

There was silence and stillness. Every light in the house had been turned on, but it still felt empty, as if no one had occupied it for a very long time. All the Deepavali decorations were gone, and the only reminder of the day itself were the fresh garlands of flowers draped around the frames of the deities.

Shreya paused at the front door for a minute, hand pressed against her side to soothe the stitch. *Should I go? This doesn't feel... normal. Might be best to leave before I get murdered.*

“You humans and your imaginations,” the voice chortled again. *Wait. Is it answering my thoughts?!*

A...man? A man dressed in a dhoti—tied to resemble pants with gold embroidery all along the edges—was leaning out of her kitchen doorway and looking at her indignantly. He was tall and topless and covered in gold and jewels. There were thick gold bands on his arms, accentuating his slight musculature. Each finger was adorned with a ring encrusted with a precious stone of various colours, winking and glittering in a way that made their authenticity undeniable. Shreya recognised emerald, sapphire, ruby and diamond. But there were a few other stones that looked like nothing from Earth. As he stepped all the way into the hallway, she noticed a beautifully detailed belt of gold at least eight centimetres wide, wrapped around his waist, securing the dhoti to his body. She could make out several figures on it; some seemed to be dancing and singing, while others were in various fighting styles or just sitting cross-legged.

But most striking of all was the crown that rested on his head. It resembled a helmet, if indeed there were helmets made out

of solid gold and lined with gems of every conceivable colour. Underneath it, dark curly hair hung down in loose tendrils, coming to an end just above his strong shoulders. Shreya stood still, her mouth agape. He was quite a sight, and she needed a few moments to take it all in. She stared at the man, too dumbfounded to move or think.

His mouth is moving... he must be saying something.

The look on his face changed from indignation to exasperation. Shreya forced herself back into the present, just in time to hear, "OF COURSE I'M SAYING SOMETHING!" He rolled his eyes, an action that didn't quite match the glamour of his outfit even though it made him slightly more normal.

"Um...yes. What were you saying?" she asked, opting for the safety of politeness.

"I was saying that I am *not it*. I am a *he*. And I would appreciate it if you remembered that."

"Yes, of course. My mistake." After a pause she added, "You know, I don't feel quite right." On the verge of fainting again, she pulled out a chair from the dining table and plopped down in it. Not being able to make sense of what was happening was giving her a pounding headache.

Great. I'm woozy in front of a stranger who has somehow gained access into my home. I'm definitely about to die.

"Ah, yes. That would be from the dimensional change. It's always a little disconcerting when we hop from one time to another. And don't worry, you won't die from it."

"Mmmhmmm. Sure," Shreya mumbled, eyes closed in an effort to keep the pounding at bay.

"Well, we'd better start."

She lifted her head off the table and stared at the man blearily. He was now standing directly in front of her. His eyes were large and expressive and framed by the longest lashes she had ever seen on a person. He was beaming down at her as if she should be just

as excited as he was.

"Okay, time to put this dream to an end," Shreya said firmly.

"Dream?"

"Yes. Dream. I must be dreaming. There is no other way to explain why someone who broke into my home would feel comfortable showing themselves to me while dressed like a prince from an era I'm pretty sure no longer exists. Who can, by the way, magically read my thoughts! So yes, this is a dream. It is the only logical explanation. Now if you would excuse me, I must go back to sleep." Shreya threw both arms on the table, rested her head on them and closed her eyes determinedly.

About a second later, she felt a finger prodding her shoulder.

"Go away," she mumbled.

"Do you really think you're dreaming? As if you would ever be able to dream up someone as good-looking as I am. Although I must say, 'prince' is a good description."

Shreya didn't bother responding.

"Tell me this, then. If you're really dreaming, how is it that you can feel the floor, the table? How come you can *choose* to go back to sleep?"

Shreya lifted her head off the table and looked at him blearily, noticing that he was now lounging on the table itself, one leg straight out and the other bent at the knee. He seemed quite at ease, as if lying on tables was something he did regularly. Choosing not to comment on this she simply said, "It's called lucid dreaming."

The man tilted his head back and looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Strange. That's not a term I am familiar with. What does it mean?"

Too tired for politeness any more, she said, "Google it."

"How do I oogle it?"

"No, Google."

"What is that?"

With an exasperated groan, she threw her hands over her eyes and said, “Google is a search engine that literally everyone in the universe uses to find out just about anything. Lucid dreaming is one of those things you can look up. It is a mental state where the dreamer is aware that they are dreaming and they have some control over it.”

The man looked a little miffed. “Well, then that’s just dreaming, isn’t it? I’ve always been able to control my dreams. And for future reference, I can assure you that *not* everyone in the universe knows of or uses this googil.”

“Google.”

“That’s what I said. Now, come on. We must be getting on with it. We are on a deadline of sorts. I must hand you over promptly.”

“Please stop talking. I’ve had quite a day. I just want to go back to bed.”

“What do I have to do to show you this isn’t a dream?”

“Stop talking.”

“Well, if I do that then we’d just be sitting here. Plus, if I let you control things then you’d actually think you’re doing that lurid dreaming thing and be less likely to believe me.”

“*Lucid* dreaming. And I don’t believe you at all.”

The man sighed loudly. “Oh, you are a funny one. You essentially scream for help, making it almost impossible to ignore you, and then when help comes you refuse to acknowledge it. It’s incredibly backward, you know.”

Shreya’s eyes went wide. *How does he know that?*

Silence.

“How come you didn’t answer my thought this time?”

“Well, I can’t pay attention to every thought you deign to think, can I? My attention has to also be focused on other things.”

“So you only pick up on my thoughts when you want to?”

“Not quite. I only hear them when you are emphasising them heavily. For example, when you’re yelling the words mentally, or

if there’s a lot of force behind them. I prefer staying out of human minds. I find them to be generally quite unwelcome places.”

“I see...” Shreya said, not seeing at all. “How did you know about me asking for help?”

“Because you yelled it. You yelled it, pleaded for it, begged for it so loudly that it was impossible to ignore. It caused quite a stir, you know. It echoed around the stars, a big violet ball of energy that demanded attention.”

“You lost me.”

“It’s not your fault. Your kind is restrained by the very limits you set.”

“Oh...”

He smiled magnanimously.

She squinted at him. “Who *are* you?”

“Finally. I was wondering when you were going to ask me that.” He slid off the table in one elegant swish. “My name is Apurva. I’m a ghandarva serving in the Court of Gods. I am at your service.”

He made a little courtly bow here, regally inclining his head at Shreya. She stared at him blankly.

“I have no idea what any of that means.”

“Of course you don’t. By the human calendar, Hinduism is thousands upon thousands of years old. By that assessment, how could you possibly know everything about it? Ghandarvas have multiple roles in the greater universe. We are trained in all sixty-four arts and are the only beings allowed to perform in the Court of Gods.”

“Perform? Like, dance?”

“If need be. Mostly we play music. Humans usually refer to us as celestial musicians. Although, when the need arises, we are also fierce warriors.”

“Oh. That’s...cool,” Shreya said, trying to imagine him in a battle with all his jewellery and that crown. Her eyes wandered

around the room, taking in the blankness of the walls and again, noting the un-lived ambience. It was as if the house had stood empty for years.

“You don’t believe me.”

“It’s all a little hard to swallow.”

“Yes, I suppose it must be. Ghandarvas who get sent to Earth to help humans are usually imbued with certain special powers for a short period of time. I can look into your past or present and tell you things that only you will know. Will that convince you?”

“I don’t see how it could hurt.”

“Very well then.”

Apurva closed his eyes for barely a second before opening them again and clapping his hands together. “Let’s see...you still sleep with a doll. A pink starfish wearing green underpants with purple flowers on them.” He looked at her somewhat suspiciously before continuing. “You still bite your nails in private. During your first year in secondary school, you once tried to sneak out with your friends to go watch a movie but you got so afraid that you couldn’t even bring yourself to walk out of the classroom, so you ended up covering for your friends while you sat through another five hours of school. You kissed a boy for the first time when you were fourteen.” He paused here, head cocked to the side. “Horrible technique. I hope you’ve improved. You started menstruating when you were twelve, but you only told your parents about it two days later because you didn’t want to miss veena lessons. I must say, I admire your dedication to the arts but that is rather strange.”

“All right, all right. I believe you. Please stop.” She peered hard at him. “How’d you know all that?”

“You still seem suspicious.”

“Well, I’ve been raised to be sceptical of men who know far more about me than they should.”

“That sounds unnecessarily restrictive. The simple answer is that I am a ghandarva and I—”

“And you have been imbued with special powers. Yes, I heard the pitch.”

Apurva waited patiently as if he knew that there was more to come.

“If you are what you say you are, then why are you here? This is certainly no Court of Gods. And if you’re here to fight me, I’ll happily surrender right now. I couldn’t even get up to green belt in taekwondo.”

“Okay. To make things easier for you, think of it this way. Ghandarvas are messengers between the gods and sentient beings. We bridge the gap, and so if someone asks for help and needs more direct guidance, we’re the ones who show up.”

“Like customer service?”

Apurva rolled his eyes and looked up. “Really?” he asked no one in particular.

He waved his hand and the chair next to Shreya slid out of its own accord. Shreya swore as he gently folded his frame into the seat, elegantly crossing one leg on top of the other.

Ignoring her curses, Apurva continued. “Listen, Shreya. All of this is real. I wish we had time to sit down over tea and go through how this has come to be. But I cannot stress this enough: we are pressed for time.” He placed his hands on his chest before continuing, “I am a ghandarva. Your cries for help were heard, and now you’ve got me here. The sooner you believe me, the quicker we can get moving.” He paused to pinch Shreya hard on the arm. She protested loudly and rubbed at the spot, glaring at him angrily. “See? You’re not dreaming. If you’d like, I can go on reciting all your little secrets till you have to start creating new ones to keep things interesting.”

“No. That won’t be necessary. I-I believe you, so you don’t have to pinch me again. Somehow, this all feels real. But I do have one more question.”

“All right, there’s time for one more.”

“If you’re really some sort of heavenly being, then why do you talk so...normal?”

“How would you have me talk?”

“Like...more flowery.”

“Give me an example.”

“Like: ‘It is I, Apurva of the mighty ghandarvas. I am here to put your woes and sorrows to rest.’ Something like that.”

Apurva blinked at her, his extra-long eyelashes making the movement seem longer than it actually was. “If you must know, I usually communicate in Sanskrit. But since it is considered a ‘dead’ language on Earth, I figured that adopting your manner of speech would work better.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Yes, it does. I am here because I know you’ve been in pain. As has your wonderful family. We usually don’t get involved in the matters of humans but you seem to truly want some sort of divine intervention. And because we’re always ready to help those who selflessly ask for it, here I am.” He took a breath and continued, “You *can* change things, Shreya. *You* just need to take some steps.”

Shreya recalled what Janaki had told her. That she could bring joy back into the home.

“I don’t... I don’t really know how I’ll be able to improve anything. My father barely even looks at me any more and my parents’ relationship is strained. Everyone is sad and getting more detached with each passing day. Things are just different now. I don’t know how to make it all good again, like before.”

“That’s the thing. Going *back* to the way things were last time will not be the best way *forward*. Things were just all right then, but Shreya, you have a chance to make things even better than that. Far better than that. There was hope that you would be able to correct things quickly after that unhappy incident but too much time has passed. There’s too much light leaving your home. We need to stop that before darkness seeps in completely and sucks joy

and love out of yet another family,” Apurva said urgently.

“Then just tell me, tell me how to make things better,” she said, leaning in close to him, tears straining out of the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill over.

Apurva leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “Unfortunately, it won’t be as easy as all that. You have to come up with the answer on your own. Answers and the truth are almost always much less valued when given freely. You have to come to the realisation on your own.”

Shreya slumped in her seat. The way to help, probably even save her family, was still nothing more than a mirage.

“So you’re here to help me?”

“Yes, I am. I am going to take you to revisit some old memories from your past.”

“Why?”

“Because there are some lessons that you have yet to fully grasp. And before we can go forward, we must go back and heal what is still raw.”

“Oh. So we’re going to talk about my past?” Shreya asked dubiously. She didn’t think she could open up and be vulnerable with a celestial being she had just met who still had no shirt on.

“No. I’m a ghandarva, not a therapist,” he said, smoothing out some invisible wrinkles in his dhoti. “Besides, you recalling your past will be of little help. You will only be seeing and thinking about things from what you remember and from your naturally self-serving perspective. You need to realise the bigger picture. So, we’re going back to the memory itself and taking in all the angles.”

“You can do that?” Shreya asked, wincing slightly at “self-serving”.

“Yes.”

“Is that why we’re in my house? To see a memory?”

“Oh, no. This is limbo. A place that exists outside of time and the physical world that humans inhabit. In here, whatever happens will not affect the course of time and events in your

world,” he said matter-of-factly.

She nodded slowly. Pretending to understand seemed easier than asking for a detailed explanation.

Shreya looked around the house that she had grown up in. It felt like she had fainted at the altar just about five minutes ago but already things were so different. She didn’t know what the next correct move was. Was she supposed to go along with this? Could she really trust any of her choices when she had chosen so poorly in the past? How was she supposed to put all her faith in this strangely dressed warrior-musician-messenger man?

“Fair warning. If you choose to undertake this process, you must see it through. All the way through. You have to complete it. You have to see everything we have to show you, no matter how hard it gets. You have to hear every conversation necessary in order to figure out where things started going wrong. Every harsh word, every painful action. Not just yours but your family’s as well.”

Apurva leaned closer, driving his point home. “So if you give me this yes, it is a serious yes. Do not take it lightly. It will get difficult. Impossible, even. Because humans tend to forget this: before you heal, you must immerse yourself in the pain.”

Shreya pressed her lips into a thin line and shut her eyes. Apurva’s words resonated with a truth that frightened her. She felt his words penetrate her mind. Was she ready to face this pain? She’d spent the past three years doing everything she could to avoid it. And now she was being asked to face it all at once—a tsunami of hurt, guilt and shame.

What should I do? Facts. Focus on the facts. Fact: Dhiren hasn’t returned my calls. Fact: Dhiren has changed his number. Fact: I have no idea where to find him because he doesn’t appear to be in school. Fact: I am the only one looking for him. Fact: Everyone is miserable. Fact: I miss him.

“It’s a lot to digest. It’s nuts.”

“Feeling uncomfortable?”

“Extremely.”

“Good. That’s when one is forced to adapt. Do you have an answer yet?”

“No...”

“Shreya, let me make it easy for you. Have you heard from your brother since he left?”

“He didn’t exactly... I mean, no.”

“Have you tried writing him? Perhaps sending him messages on that device that humans seem perpetually glued to?”

“No. And yes.”

“Have you been able to find him?”

“No.”

“Is there anything else that you think you can do that you have not done?”

Shreya shook her head. Nothing had worked. She had created this huge hole in the family and try as she might, nothing was working to fix it.

“Do you have any other way to get him back?”

She shook her head again. She really had no choice. The decision had been made the moment she had cried out into the universe for help. “I’ll do it,” she said softly.

“Excellent. And you’re lucky you got me first. Ojaswi would have obliterated you for your indecisiveness.” Shreya was about to ask him what an Ojaswi was when he jumped up and rolled his shoulders back, stretching from side-to-side. She stared at him.

Apurva noticed her suspicious look and said, “You might want to limber up. It’s going to be a tight squeeze.”

“What? I can’t stretch in this,” she said, tugging at the sari she still wore.

“Never mind. Too late. Let’s go.”

He snapped his fingers. Shreya watched as Apurva seemed to be sucked backward from his middle, folding in half as neatly as

if he were a sheet of paper before disappearing.

Hell, no. I am not doing tha—

Without warning, she felt her belly button pull to her spine, and her throat close as the air was squeezed out of her lungs. Shreya's vision shrank to a line and then everything went black.

chapter 3

2009

SHREYA FOUND HERSELF on an unforgivingly hard surface for the second time that day. Judging by the loose gravel embedded in her cheek, she was on the ground again, only this time it was outside. The surface felt uncomfortably hot. With great effort, she rolled herself onto her back, her sari tangling around her and hiking further up her legs. Highly inappropriate and unladylike. Her family would have had a fit if they saw her rolling around on the ground like this.

Maybe worry a little more about what's happening and a little less about the sari, genius.

She opened her eyes and forced them shut again almost immediately. The sun was directly overhead and blinding. She lay there for a while, waiting to regain some sense of her body. The blackness they had moved through had flattened her out, and she could finally feel her lungs expanding inside her chest again. The air smelled like freshly cut grass. She could hear children playing. The sounds of their play seemed to be getting closer and closer.

I should move before I get trampled. Sounds like they're right next to me.

But when she opened her eyes, she realised she was too late. A

chubby little boy holding a big green ball was standing directly above her. Both his legs going right through her stomach.

What the hell?! Am I dead?!

Shreya wiggled out from under the boy and jumped up. She stared at the children who had gathered near her. None of them seemed to notice her. She waved her hand in front of the boy holding the ball, but he simply continued giggling and talking with his friend.

“They can’t see you.”

Apurva was looking at her with a bemused expression.

I’m glad one of us finds this funny.

“What happened to my body?” Shreya demanded.

“Naturally, you can’t just walk into your past and stroll around fully-formed. What would your past self do if she saw another one of her walking around as though it were the most normal thing in the world? An older version at that. You would think you’d gone crazy.”

“So the solution is to turn me into a ghost?”

Apurva snorted. “Not a ghost in the way you think. You’re not dead. You’re here to observe. Not to interfere or cause disruption. The best way to do that is to be nothing more than air.”

“Right. So I am a ghost. But I’m not dead?”

Apurva sighed and adjusted the crown on his head. “No, you are not dead.”

The group of children suddenly jerked their heads to the left at the sound of a tinkling bell. All at once, they yelled triumphantly and ran through Shreya. She seemed to expand a little every time one of them ran through her. As if whatever she was now made of was creating a little hole for the kids to get through. The overall effect was disconcerting.

“Ice cream truck,” Apurva said in explanation. Somehow, every single one of them managed to miss Apurva, even though he was standing right next to her.

Dusting herself off and readjusting her sari, she asked in as mild a manner as she could manage, “So, next obvious question: how did we get here?”

“That’s unimportant. Look.”

“I’d really like to know. That was not fun in—”

Apurva grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. “Just look.”

Shreya blinked. It was a house with a SOLD sticker stamped over a FOR SALE sign in a large front yard. It had a driveway leading up to the side of it. Large windows took up almost its entire front wall and a big wooden wraparound deck started from the side and wound its way to the back. Judging by the windows, there were three floors and high ceilings. The house looked light and airy. It was the perfect home for a family.

Shreya recognised it immediately.

“That’s my house,” she said in surprise. “But it looks different... Our front yard is filled with plants now, and the wraparound deck was painted over with shades of blue.”

“Maybe this will jog your memory,” he said with a wave of his arm.

A red Lexus pulled up to the curb less than ten metres from where they stood. A man with a big bushy black moustache sat behind the front wheel. On his index finger, winking in the sunlight that poured through the windshield, was a large rectangular gold ring.

“It’s Appa! But that’s weird...he lost that ring while swimming in Bali. And that car. We sold that car when I was twelve. I remember because my mother went through an astrology phase and the man who came to see the house told her that red was a highly inauspicious colour for all our combined stars, or something.”

Shreya turned to look at Apurva. “This...this is the first time my family sees the house together, isn’t it? But why is this memory important?”

“Keep watching.”

From the passenger seat, a woman in a long green tunic top and black jeans got out of the car. She had fewer wrinkles on her face, and there was more black than white in her hair, but it was undeniably Amma. She looked young, far younger than Shreya had ever realised.

“Wow. I forgot how beautiful she was. She doesn’t look a day over thirty, but she’s got to be almost forty here.” Shreya instinctively took a step back. “We need to hide. They still might recognise me somehow.”

Apurva placed an arm around her shoulders. “Relax. They can’t see or hear us. Ghost, remember?”

Shreya nodded wordlessly and turned to see Appa getting out of the car next, his tummy not poking over his belt, as she was used to. He waited for his wife to walk around to him, his arm patiently outstretched, reaching for her to take his hand. They smiled at each other and then looked up at the house, Amma resting her head on her husband’s shoulder. The love between the two of them was obvious.

“Isn’t it perfect, Kamini? I’ve always wanted to buy you your own home. It took a while but I finally did it,” Appa said softly.

Amma smiled at him. “It *is* perfect and I love it. But I would have been happy anywhere with you, Ram.”

Shreya gaped as the usually harsh disciplinarian her Appa was seemed to blush bashfully. “Now let’s just hope the kids love it,” he said before kissing her hand.

They’re being so sweet to each other. I don’t remember them ever being like this.

“Come out, kids!” Appa shouted.

“What is going on in there?” Amma wondered.

“Shreya’s probably still upset we’re moving her away from all her friends.”

“Hmm. Let me go talk to her,” Amma said moving towards the door.

“No, no. Let Dhiren sort it out. She looks up to him. Maybe he’ll be able to bring her around.”

“She is a strong-willed little girl, isn’t she?” Amma said with a tinge of pride in her voice.

“Yes. A little too strong-willed, if you ask me. That girl is difficult.”

“I wonder where she got it from,” Amma teased.

“He thought I was difficult even then,” Shreya said softly. Apurva squeezed her shoulder sympathetically.

Finally, the rear door popped open. Dhiren stepped out of the car, already carrying himself with a confidence that Shreya was still struggling to develop. He wore light denim jeans with a simple white T-shirt. His thick black hair, almost identical to hers in texture, was perfectly coiffed. He had dressed well even then.

“C’mon, Shreya. It’ll be okay. Singapore’s small enough. We can go back to our old neighbourhood and visit your friends anytime. We can invite them for this year’s Deepavali and, if you think about it, it’ll be a whole new place for you guys to play and hang out in. Look at the good stuff.”

Black glossy hair emerged first, tied up in a ponytail. A seven-year-old girl with big brown eyes, a sharp nose and full lips turned down into a frown stepped out of the vehicle. A dress with red roses hung down to her knees. Her arms were crossed resolutely in front of her.

“Oh wow. Shit. That’s me. Why am I so unhappy? I love this house,” Shreya said from her spot between her parents and Apurva. Her question was met with silence.

Dhiren took young Shreya by the arm and tugged her forward. They joined their parents on the front lawn.

Amma bent down to peer into her daughter’s face, gently pushing the bright blue glasses up the girl’s nose. “If you keep frowning like that, it might become permanent,” she said gravely. Then she spoiled the whole effect by pinching her on the cheek,

following it with a swift kiss.

Young Shreya dropped her arms in exasperation and whined, “The houth is too big! Why do we need so much houth!” One of her front teeth was missing, giving her a lisp. Older Shreya couldn’t help but smile at herself.

“Well, there’s also Janaki,” Amma said. “And Paatti is coming to live with us too. There’s a nice big room with an attached bathroom on the first floor that would be perfect for her. She won’t have to go up and down the stairs with those bad knees.”

“Fine. Thix, then. Thtill too much houth,” sulked young Shreya. “Our HDB was perfect! It had that playground with the swings that could go high nearby. And the park was closeth! Pluth, all my friends thtayed in the thame block.”

Dhiren’s eyes studied the building annoyance on Appa’s face and quickly interjected with, “Yes, the HDB was nice. But there is one thing this house has that our old one didn’t.”

“What?”

“We won’t have to share a room any more!”

“Really!” Young Shreya whipped around and stared at the house with a new look of wonder.

“Yes,” Amma said with a laugh. “There are five bedrooms. Seems quite pointless for you and your brother to have to keep on sharing.”

“See? Our own rooms. That we can decorate however we want. You won’t have to listen to my snoring ever again, and I won’t have to listen to you talk in your sleep. Plus, you can invite your friends over for a sleepover and have all that extra space just for yourselves.”

Young Shreya finally cracked a wide smile, revealing another missing tooth.

This was not a cute phase.

“I gueth that would be fun...do we get to pick our own roomth, Amma?”

Amma laughed at her daughter’s sudden change in attitude. “One day your moods are going to give you whiplash, ma. Yes, you are free to choose. First come, first served.” With that, her two kids raced towards the front door, throwing it open and disappearing into the house. “The second floor is for me and your dad! The third floor is yours!” she shouted through cupped hands.

Apurva took Shreya’s arm and guided her into the house in which she had just been a few minutes before. But this time everything was stripped bare. The walls were streaked with paint swatches. Construction and renovation equipment lay around haphazardly. Plastic sheets hung from certain sections of the house, and painter’s tape had been edged along all the walls.

“It’s messy, but just try to picture what it will look like when it’s all done,” Appa said as he entered three steps behind her. Shreya resisted the urge to run and hide, forcefully remembering that her parents could not see her.

“Ram, please. These are *our* walls,” Amma said, running her hands along them. “This is where our kitchen will be, where we will build a home, plant a garden, marry off our children. It’s perfect. From this mess, something beautiful will be created. In fact, this mess *is* beautiful. I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am.” Amma embraced Appa.

“Do you know what’s happening upstairs?” Apurva asked Shreya, distracting her from the scene unfolding before them.

“Yes. Dhiren and I are fighting over the rooms. We both want the bigger one with the attached bathroom. I managed to convince him to give it to me.”

“Hmm. Are you sure that’s what happened?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s see.”

A great hullabaloo sounded as the two kids came thundering down the stairs yelling for their parents. Appa exhaled in exasperation.

“Eh! Don’t run!” Amma called. “What’s wrong?”

Young Shreya and Dhiren started yelling at the top of their voices simultaneously.

Amma raised her hand and there was silence. “Now. Why don’t you tell me calmly what the problem is? One at a time. Dhiren, you go first.”

“No, Amma! Me firh—”

“Quiet, Shreya!” Appa said sharply.

“Go on,” Amma directed at Dhiren.

Younger Shreya thumbed her nose at her older brother. He chose to ignore her.

“Amma, the two bedrooms upstairs are really nice. But the one on the right is so much bigger. You know, bigger closets and more floor space. And it comes with its own bathroom. We both want it.”

“I see. And why do you think you should have it?”

“I have more clothes and more stuff. Plus, I did get up there first and the rules were first come, first served.”

“What’s wrong with the other room?”

“Nothing at all. It’s just smaller. Although it does have a skylight, which is pretty cool.”

Young Shreya interjected hotly: “Then you take it, thince it’s tho cool! The bigger bedroom is obviouthly meant for a girl.”

“That’s a very intelligent point, Shreya. But you wear the same three dresses every single time we go out. I don’t know why you need all that closet space,” Dhiren remarked.

Appa guffawed, slapping his son on the back.

“Hey now,” Amma said, “don’t gang up on her. Listen, Shreya. Did Dhiren beat you to the room?”

“Yeth, but h—”

“Then I’m sorry, ma. The room is his. It’s only fair.”

Young Shreya burst into tears. “It’th *not* fair! I *really* want this room. It’ll make me feel better. Can’t you thee? I have to leave

all my friendth behind. I don’t know if I will be able to make new oneth here! What if all the kidth are older? Or if they’re all babieth? I didn’t even know we were moving till lath week! And now I get the wortht bedroom in the houth! It is *not* fair! It ith anything *but* fair!”

Older Shreya watched the scene unfold queasily. “I was such a brat,” she mumbled. “Amma and Appa just wanted us to have the best life possible, and there I am complaining about *room sizes*.”

Older Shreya saw the look on Dhiren’s face. A normal boy might have been annoyed or angered by such behaviour. But Dhiren was looking at his parents’ frustrated expressions. Smiling widely, he got down on one knee and gently held his sister’s hands. “Hey, it’s okay. You can have the room.”

Young Shreya stopped crying abruptly. Her glasses were misted over. “Really?”

Dhiren removed her glasses and wiped the lenses with the hem of his shirt. “Yeah. I mean, you’re right. You’ll probably need the space as you get older and fill the house with snobby teenage girls. Plus, the skylight is pretty cool. I’ll be the only one among all my friends to have one.” He eyeballed the glasses before gently putting them back on young Shreya’s face.

“Are you thure?”

“Absolutely.”

He was so nice to me, even back then...

“Yeth! Wow. I get the big room! Thankth, Dhiren! You can uthe the bathroom anytime. Amma, come thee my room! It’s huge!” Young Shreya made for the stairs in excitement, then paused on the landing when she realised that no one was following her.

Amma and Appa were patting their oldest on the back. “That was very kind, Dhiren. I know you must have really wanted it or you wouldn’t have argued for it.”

“Yes. Such sacrifices are often overlooked but we understand what it must’ve meant to you. That was very generous. You are

growing into a fine young man. Hopefully your sister learns from your example.”

Dhiren smiled graciously. From halfway up the stairs, young Shreya looked down upon the scene, a scowl stretching across her face.

“And, end scene,” Apurva said. He snapped his fingers and they were once again in the absolute crushing blackness.

chapter 4

LIMBO

SHREYA PICKED HERSELF up off the floor for the third time. They were back in her house. Or at least, the version of her house that was empty, but not totally empty. Disappearing and reappearing in different representations of the same place was a little jarring.

“You know, I’m aware that you’re here to help me. And the fact that I just got to experience a memory in person is nothing short of amazing.” She rubbed her sore butt and checked her elbows for scrapes and bruises before continuing. “But you really need to give me some kind of warning before you do that. My sari is one second away from ripping, and the whole experience is terrifying.”

“Oh. Well, just keep your knees bent and lower your centre of gravity. Take deep breaths and exhale slowly when we start moving; it helps the mind focus on your body and not on the incomprehensibility of what’s happening. And brace for impact, of course. It comes with practise. It used to jar me quite a bit too, but now I barely even notice it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said drily.

“So, tell me. Why do you think you had to see that?” Apurva

asked, reassuming his earlier position on the chair.

“I don’t know,” she said automatically, slumping into the facing chair.

“Think about it.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. But she felt too restless to focus on anything. With a slightly frustrated sigh, she got up again, and walked around and around the table in the hope that the pacing would stimulate some ideas. When that failed, she marched along the hallway, moving deeper into her house. On the other end of the first floor was the living room that opened onto the back porch and into the backyard. There were windows on almost every wall here but instead of the usual unfiltered sunlight coming in, there was just the dimness of dull greys. Outside resembled the middle of a storm cloud. She watched as the mist moved and undulated, swirling along the windows before lazily drifting past. She touched the glass and jerked her hand back in surprise. The window was extremely cold. Freezing, in fact.

At these temperatures, the windows should be iced over and the house should be glacial.

“Hey, Apurva. It’s freezing outside. I practically got frostbite just from touching the window. How come we’re not popsicles?”

“There is no sun in limbo. Well, no real sun.”

“No sun?”

“No.”

“But...living things need sunlight to survive.”

“Things are slightly different here. Don’t worry, the cold won’t get in.”

“Interesting. How are we still warm, then?”

“You’re very curious about the mechanics of all this, aren’t you?”

Shreya pulled out a chair from around the table and lowered herself into it, looking at Apurva expectantly.

“Fine,” Apurva sighed. “Limbo for Dummies, it is.”

He walked around to a window and indicated outside. “Limbo

is a controlled space. I can add or take away whatever I want. Naturally, it is cold without a source of heat, but because we would both fare better in warmth than sub-zero temperatures, I chose that instead. However, it’s safer to keep the modifications to limbo as minimal as possible. That way, reality won’t leak in every which way.”

“Has that happened before?” Shreya asked.

“Once. A newbie forgot to seal all the sides of limbo, so they still had a sort of ‘window’ into reality. It made the person he was trying to help absolutely lose it. The poor boy thought he’d gone mad.”

“Wow. What happened?”

“We had to...you know what, that isn’t important. Have you thought about why you had to see that moment from your past?”

Shreya frowned at him. “You’re not going to finish the story?”

“It really isn’t important. I imagine that this all has to be very unusual for someone who’s grown up strictly in the physical world, but the mechanics are a lot less significant than why you’re here. And it feels like you’re stalling.”

Shreya tapped her fingers on the table. “Okay then. That memory... Was it to make me see that I was selfish?”

“Do you think you behaved selfishly?”

“Well, yes. I didn’t quite like seeing that.”

“You did behave a little selfishly. But that’s not the point of this exercise. You were seven in that memory, only a child. And just like most children at that age, you were more concerned with your friends and getting your way. Basically, your behaviour wasn’t all that unexpected. So, no. You need to think a little harder. Also, you need to develop some thick skin. You’re going to be seeing more things that you may not particularly enjoy.” Apurva magically summoned the ottoman to him, resting his rich brown leather-sandaled feet on it.

Nice sandals.

“I’d really like to change out of this sari,” Shreya said. “This is

my home...but are my clothes still here?"

Apurva blinked. "They are now."

★

A short while later, Shreya reappeared in a pair of her comfiest jeans and an oversized hoodie. She had traded her uncomfortable strappy heels for a pair of Converse high-tops, and had removed all the jewellery, leaving only a pair of silver earrings shaped like angels.

Apurva had been busy. There was a beautiful green, gold and white ceramic teapot sitting delicately on a wooden serving tray. Next to it were two matching teacups with the smallest handles she had ever seen. Having once been forced to clean every item in the kitchen for saying a naughty word, albeit accidentally, Shreya knew that the tea set didn't belong to her family.

"That's beautiful," she admired.

"Thank you. It is one of my favourites," Apurva said as he poured out the thick brownish liquid.

"Let me guess. It arrived via the nothingness express."

"Oh no. I generally keep a tea set about my person," he said vaguely, pushing one of the tiny teacups in front of her.

Shreya couldn't tell if he was joking or not. Both possibilities seemed equally likely.

Could be a Mary Poppins carpet bag scenario.

"Try it," he instructed.

Shreya took a sip that quickly turned into a slurp. "Wow, that's incredible. That's the best masala tea I've ever had," she declared, smacking her lips.

"Thank you. The secret is a special ingredient."

Shreya waited expectantly. "Well?" she prodded.

"I'm not going to tell you that," he said, frowning. "*Secret.*"

Shreya raised her eyebrows in surprise and then laughed.

Apurva was growing on her. For a while there was nothing but the clink of cups and satisfied sighs.

Once they had each had at least two servings of the lovely tea, they returned to their earlier conversation.

"If it isn't selfishness, then I'm pretty much out at sea here."

"All right then. I'll tell you. That was the first time the thought that Dhiren is your parents' favourite popped into your head."

Shreya looked at him thoughtfully. Then she conceded. "I suppose you're right. It was that moment the three of them shared. It was like witnessing something private that I wasn't invited to be a part of. Like, I was intentionally being excluded from it."

Apurva nodded. "Yes. And though that might have seemed to be the most obvious conclusion then, what do you think of it now?"

"Not much difference... It didn't feel good then and it doesn't feel good now."

A look of compassion flashed across Apurva's face, forcing Shreya to immediately avert her gaze. She didn't want to see herself through his eyes. She felt spoilt and ungrateful. The memory had shown her that she had clearly been wrong.

Shreya stared into her teacup. The masala tea had warmed her from the inside, but her head still felt oddly cold. She thought about the way Dhiren had tried to make her feel comfortable about the new house. About the excited look on Appa's face when showing Amma the house he had worked so hard to purchase. She recalled the simple wishes Amma had made for her family.

"They were all so happy, and I just really made it about myself."

Apurva took the teacup out of her hand and quietly filled it up again.

"I guess it was to show me that everyone was acting out of love," Shreya said slowly, "for me and for each other. But I was too concerned with what was being taken away from me to see what was being given."

“What did seven-year-old Shreya feel was being taken away from her?”

“Friends. The playground near our old block that had an entire section full of swings. The little store that I always went to after school to buy sweets. The park that was just around the corner.” Shreya toyed with the strings on her hoodie. “I guess...I was afraid about having to leave all this stuff I was used to. And then when I saw that moment between the three of them, it made me even more uncomfortable.”

Apurva broke into a smile. “See? There’s hope for you yet.” He picked up his teacup and clinked it against hers; Shreya looked at him questioningly.

“Isn’t that something humans do?” he asked.

“Yes. But usually with alcohol to toast something or someone. I’ve never seen it done with tea before.”

“Well, to new interpretations of old experiences then,” Apurva said, holding up his teacup. Shreya giggled and clinked hers against his before downing the contents.

“Revisiting that memory was to help you see that you *always* have a choice. Although the thought did pop into your head, you could have dismissed it or tried to figure out what you were feeling that resulted in that thought. But because you chose to keep thinking it, you unconsciously chose to keep feeding the thought. Doing so became a habit and soon you started seeing it in everything. And that in turn built resentment and led to the feelings you developed and the way you acted.”

“I started feeling like an outsider,” Shreya said softly. “Like I didn’t quite belong. Either that or like no one really wanted to have me around.”

Apurva remained silent, giving her time to digest the information.

But that doesn’t explain why Appa was so perpetually disapproving of me. Even then.

Shreya shook her head, clearing the cobwebs. “But the thought popped into my head. Repeatedly. How am I supposed to just ignore it?”

“By not entertaining it. By letting it float on by. Like lotuses!” Apurva said brightly.

Shreya pulled an intentionally ugly expression on her face. “Whenever you see this look,” she said, pointing to her raised eyebrow, wrinkled nose and widened eyes, “it means you’ve completely lost me.”

“Beautiful. You’ll make some man very happy someday,” Apurva deadpanned.

“Take a picture, quick. It’s perfect for Instagram.”

“Instagram?”

“It’s this app—you know what, that’s not important either. You were talking about thoughts and lotuses.”

Apurva looked at her curiously for a beat before continuing. “There’s an ancient temple built out of basalt at the source of the Ganges. It’s home to the ghandarvas. In fact, the river flows right through the temple. Snow-capped mountains all along the other side. Down this river come the biggest, most beautiful lotuses you’ve ever seen. Fully bloomed, completely open to the sun and sky. Each petal a slightly different shade of pink, so the overall effect is breath-taking. All of them float on their own individual lotus pad, the greenest ones ever created. The current pushes them along. The water is so clear that in the moonlight, you can see the stars reflected in the water, and it looks like the lotuses are floating on a river of stars. Whether it’s sunlight or moonlight, it’s beautiful. Always.”

“That sounds amazing,” Shreya murmured, transfixed.

“Now imagine that amongst all that beauty, you notice a lotus that has a tear on its pad or that perhaps it hasn’t fully bloomed. You notice that its colours look different or that it’s much smaller. You keep pace with the river, looking at the lotus, wondering why

it looks the way it does. You pick it up out of the water, study it closely. You question the reason for it being this way over and over again. You begin to obsess about it, to the point where you stop noticing the beauty of the mountains. You become deaf to the sounds of the river as it bubbles along on sunny days and rushes down furiously on rainy ones. You stop noticing the beautiful black basalt walls of the temple. All your attention is fully taken up by this one lotus.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. No one would do that. Why would anyone bother with this one little thing when there’s a temple and a river and a mountain and hundreds of other lotuses?”

“Your thoughts are like the lotuses, Shreya. You let the idea that Dhiren was the favourite seep into your mind. You let it visit and rent a room, and then eventually you gave it a hundred-year lease. That little thought in that moment that you just revisited became a belief. That belief became a habit, and subconsciously you started looking for it in any scenario that you felt compared you to him.”

Shreya felt the truth of his words resonate within her. Her cheeks grew hot from shame. “But Appa *clearly* favours him. He’s always going on and on about Dhiren’s accomplishments and how lucky he is to have a son like him. The only time he ever talks about me is to compare us and then ask *why* I’m not more like him.”

“Hmm. That can’t feel good.”

“It didn’t, it doesn’t. It felt like I was always being judged.”

“I’m sorry you felt that way. But if that’s the case, then why did Dhiren become the source of your resentment? It hardly seems fair.”

That’s a good question...

“I’m not saying it was fair. I’m saying that that seemed to be the only way to behave. I didn’t really understand what I was feeling when I was younger, and by the time I could identify

it, it had turned into anger. It was always there, just under the surface.” The string on her hoodie finally gave way to all her tugging and came sliding out of one of the holes. Shreya stared at it in surprise.

Apurva looked at her openly, his kind eyes twinkling. “That is another thought that does you great disservice, Shreya. What you just verbalised limits you to only one type of response. There is always more than one way to react, and believe me, the easiest way is usually the worst option.”

“Yeah, I know that. I guess I’ve always known that. It’s difficult to act on it though. Anger and hurt make me stupid.”

Apurva smiled. “You are far too hard on yourself. We’re here to learn. And to do that, we must suspend judgement. Especially self-judgement. Do you think you can do that?”

Shreya sighed. “You’re asking me to do something that everyone does from the age they learn to think.”

“Yes, I am. Can you do it?”

Shreya nodded wordlessly.

“Shall we go visit a memory in which you exhibit this anger?”

Shreya tensed. “Which one?”

“The one right before your first veena recital.”

Shreya felt a little relieved. Then, realising the totality of what he meant, she groaned loudly and slumped over, gently knocking her head against the surface of the table repeatedly.

“Let me know when you’re done with that,” Apurva said, sounding amused.

She looked at him, hair plastered messily on her forehead. “Well, at least it isn’t the...” she trailed off.

“The other one?” Apurva offered helpfully.

“Yeah.”

Apurva stood up and started to stretch, rolling his shoulders forward. Shreya raised her teacup to her lips and drained every last drop. It might be a while before she received any more sustenance.

Apurva snapped his fingers, the sound echoing through the house and her body. The teacup she had been holding just moments before was left clattering in its saucer.

chapter 5

2015

EVERY FEW YEARS, Amma would take it upon herself to redo the living area of the house. Every other month or so, Amma and Appa held family gatherings or lunch/dinner parties. The living area was a large room with high peaked ceilings and floor-to-ceiling glass sliding doors. The space had seen numerous facelifts. Looking in pictures, Shreya had always been able to identify the year and the events that had taken place, based on the setup of the living room.

Wall-length purple couches and a gigantic diamond-shaped grey marble table meant that first year and her seventh birthday party. Cream-coloured sofas, a green armchair and two identical rectangular coffee tables meant her parents' seventeenth wedding anniversary and Dhiren's graduation from secondary school. It had been a useful way for tracking the family's colossal photo album collection, but Shreya had never envisioned it coming in handy in such a peculiar way.

My first solo veena recital.

Sheer curtains were draped prettily in front of the sliding doors. Through the curtains, sunlight filtered in hazily, dappling on the large, round, wooden coffee table, bookshelves, grey couches that

faced each other, and the family portrait that was the centrepiece of the space.

The portrait had been taken just after they had moved into the house. Paatti was the only one seated. Amma and Appa stood behind her beaming, while Dhiren and Shreya were standing next to her. The photographer had been excellent, making them all feel comfortable immediately. The result was a family picture that exuded warmth.

“That’s a beautiful photo,” Apurva said.

“Yes, it really is, isn’t it? I haven’t seen it in a while. To be honest, I don’t even know where it is any more.”

“How come?” Apurva asked. A little wooden bench had appeared behind them. He waved his arm, indicating for her to take a seat.

“Well, Appa took it down a few days after the...thing. I used to think he did it out of spite and anger, but I think it just became too difficult to look at every day.”

Apurva nodded compassionately. After a pause he asked, “Do you know when we are?”

Shreya nodded and pointed at the living room door. “The world’s sleaziest veena salesman is about to enter in three...two...one.”

Right on cue, a sweaty man of average build lumbered into the room. He was carrying a patchily polished veena, vehemently rejecting all of Appa’s offers to help carry the instrument. Thirteen-year-old Shreya came trailing after the two of them, watching the salesman suspiciously. There was a ring of hair around the back of his head and his stringy black moustache flailed about as he huffed and puffed to the table. Then, somewhat unceremoniously, he plonked the veena on the tabletop.

Younger Shreya, older Shreya and Apurva winced simultaneously.

The salesman wiped his hand on his pants quickly and extended

it to Appa. “I am Mani, sir. Thank you for contacting me.” With a flourish, he waved at the veena, “This is the finest one I have stocked. I believe you will find it highly satisfactory.”

Appa nodded and frowned down at the veena. Just then, Paatti entered the room, carrying a tray of tea. She set it down on the table and politely asked Mani to help himself.

“Did he actually offload this travesty of an instrument on you?” Apurva asked, appalled.

Shreya snorted. “He tried.”

Mani was busy haggling with Appa about pricing and how veenas were usually in the thousand-dollar range because of the workmanship. Appa sighed and nodded. A triumphant glint flickered in Mani’s eyes.

“Well, Shreya? Are you satisfied with it? You’re the one who’s going to be playing it after all.”

“Oh! The veena is for the little madam?” Mani said rapturously. “Interested in learning the veena, are we? Trust me, little madam. You will be the envy of all your classmates when you walk into class with this beauty!”

Younger Shreya scowled at being called “little madam”. It morphed into a glare when he started reaching to pinch her cheek. Noticing her expression, Mani hastily retreated.

“Actually, Shreya’s been playing the veena since she was eight,” Paatti interjected. “She has a recital coming up next week and it’s high time she got one of her own.”

Mani nodded his head enthusiastically, his smile never slipping.

Appa looked at his watch for the third time since entering the room. “Shall we finalise payment, then?”

“Not yet,” Paatti interjected. “I think we should inspect it further. Maybe even let Shreya play it a little. See if she’s comfortable with it.”

“Oh no, madam. I don’t let my customers play on it before purchase. If she wants, she can pluck one or two of the strings.”

Paatti frowned heavily at Mani. “You don’t let them try the instrument out first? That’s very strange.”

Mani paused here to gulp down his cup of tea. He smacked his lips before continuing self-importantly, “I do that to preserve the integrity of the instrument.”

Shreya giggled as she saw her younger self roll her eyes.

Appa looked at his watch yet again. “Listen, I really need to go. I have something important to do. Can I leave this to the two of you?”

Younger Shreya looked up from her position on the couch and offered Appa a small smile. He nodded, shook Mani’s hand and strode out of the room. A few moments later, the distinctive sound of his office door closing was heard.

“Well! Madam and *little* madam,” Mani said condescendingly, “I am all yours! Ask me whatever you want.” He eyed the two of them like a shark.

Paatti ran her hands over the veena. Over the big bulbous front, the kudam, and the strings and the fretboard, Mani talking at her all the while.

Younger Shreya pulled her shoulders back and cleared her throat. “I would like to see another instrument, please.”

Mani started. “No, little madam. You really don’t have to. This one is as good as it gets.” Without waiting for a response, he turned his attention back to Paatti.

Younger Shreya leaned forward, demanding Mani’s attention. “Do not try and fool us. My father and grandmother may not know much about the veena, but I do. This...thing is absolute rubbish.”

Mani’s body jerked in indignation and he opened his mouth to speak, but younger Shreya continued.

“I can see that the different sections were carved individually, which is usually done with the cheaper veenas. But the problem is that the sections are glued together so badly that it looks like a strong gust of wind would dismantle the whole thing. And don’t

even get me started on the sanding work.”

At this, Paatti flipped the veena over and studied it closely. “She’s right,” she directed at Mani, who looked like he was rapidly deflating.

“I know my father specifically asked for a veena that was carved from a single piece of wood, preferably from the jackfruit tree. I want it polished down to perfection. An instrument that meets all these criteria is worth the price you’re asking for. If you have nothing else to offer except this, then please leave. You’ve wasted enough of our time today.”

“I-I... Actually, it is good. B-but...” Mani hastily continued, seeing that younger Shreya and Paatti were about to stand. “I do have exactly what you’re looking for in my truck. Let me go get it. Five minutes. Please. Give me five minutes.”

He bounced up, jerking the offending instrument off the table.

“And I want a discount for how you tried to pawn *this* off on us,” younger Shreya said firmly.

Mani bristled. “I’m afraid that is quite impossible.”

Younger Shreya sighed and stood swiftly. “Then I will make sure that everyone I know who plays an Indian classical instrument—and there are *plenty*—will know exactly who you are and what you tried to do here.”

Mani paled. “All right. I’ll give you a discount.”

“Thank you. And I know how much these actually cost so don’t try to pull the wool over our eyes...again.”

Mani edged towards the door.

“And might I suggest you get rid of *that* completely? Indian classical instruments need their players and pawning off something like that on a beginner will only discourage them.”

“Of course, of course,” Mani said, his cheeks hot and the sweat now visibly pouring down his face and his shirt.

“Please don’t keep us waiting too long,” she called after him.



A while later, a chastised-looking Mani was seated on the bench next to the front door, hurriedly shoving his feet into shoes. Younger Shreya had lit up like a Christmas tree when he brought in the new instrument and promptly agreed to his asking price. Despite having made a tidy profit, Mani moved with the speed of a man who couldn't wait to leave.

Apurva chuckled at Mani. Paatti was opening the door for him and right before he left, he said, "Your granddaughter really knows her own mind, doesn't she?" At this Apurva started laughing even louder.

Paatti smiled and bid him farewell.

Older Shreya and Apurva looked out the window. Apurva let out a long whistle.

"Wow, you scared him half to death!"

"He deserved it. Trying to sell us that hideous thing."

Apurva laughed. "I suppose he did. Still, excellent handling of the situation. I don't think he'll dare let that piece see the light of day ever again."

"He won't, if he has any sense. Anyone who knows anything at all of the veena will see that model for what it truly is. Abominable."

The two of them drifted back to the living room. Younger Shreya was seated on the table, her brand-new beautifully polished veena resting gracefully on her lap. She pulled her shoulders back and elongated her spine with an ease that clearly indicated she had done this many times before. She touched the strings and the frets reverently, and then all at once, her fingers exploded into motion. They danced along the neck of the veena, her body swaying seamlessly with the music, the veena her servant.

"Wow," Apurva said again. "You're really good. Each note is perfect."

Older Shreya didn't respond. There was a lump in her throat

that threatened to betray her pain. She'd forgotten how joyful playing the veena had made her. It suddenly dawned on her just how much she missed it.

Younger Shreya stopped and smiled. Once again, she held the veena gently, almost as if it were a child. Her eyes misted over, thoughts taking her to another place.

"What's happening here?" Apurva asked curiously.

"She's thinking about the first time she, or we, saw a veena," Shreya said, smiling at her younger self fondly.

"Your parents introduced veena lessons to you, I assume."

Shreya snickered. "Not at all. It came into my life in the most random way."



After trying out a series of extra-curricular activities that ranged from basketball to chess to needlepoint, her parents had thrown up their hands in despair and left her to explore the options that were left. By the time she turned nine, she was afraid that she would never take to anything with gusto like Dhiren had. Like most Singaporean boys, he had started playing football as soon as he was big enough for cleats. Appa had even coached the junior football team sponsored by the neighbourhood. Much to her father's never-ending pride, Dhiren showed a real knack for the sport, picking it up quickly and outperforming his peers in a few months. Appa shook him out of bed every Sunday to run drills and conditioning work till Dhiren implored him to stop, because he found the exercises far too easy and was getting bored.

At that point, Dhiren had been instructed to try out for an amateur league football team, the school team having being dubbed as beneath him. Appa sat in on every one of his games, cheering Dhiren on with all the energy he could muster, much to the chagrin of his son.

In the mysterious way that things sometimes unfold, Shreya found her passion through a chance encounter with their new neighbour's daughter. Paatti and Amma had gone grocery shopping. Appa had taken Dhiren out on one of their monthly shopping sprees for the latest in football gear. Janaki was on the phone with her family, a conversation that always lasted no less than an hour, which meant that Shreya was on her own and bored.

She wandered into the backyard. A small goalpost had been erected by the apple tree. Dhiren often spent hours kicking the ball into the net.

Shreya snorted. She didn't see what the big deal was. How hard could it be?

She rolled the ball to the little worn out spot that Dhiren always started from. Then closing one eye for better accuracy, she took aim, pulled back her leg and kicked the ball with all her might.

The ball went clean over the wooden fence and landed in the neighbour's yard with a thump, followed by a loud and high-pitched "OW!"

Her initial reaction was to run back inside. But she knew it was important and prudent to check on the person she had accidentally hit. She peeped through the gap in the fence, saying, "I'm so sorry! I thought I kicked the ball straight but it didn't go that way. Are you okay?"

Brown eyes enlarged behind spectacles looked back at her. It was a girl about her age. Shreya could tell she was smiling by the way the corners of her eyes crinkled up at the edges. "It's okay," she said. "I have difficulty with kicking too. My name is Divya. Do you want to come over?"

"Okay!"

Shreya had raced over without bothering to tell anyone, going out the back gate and through the one to the neighbour's yard. Divya was eight, too. She had short hair and bangs and a huge smile that was full of teeth. They bonded instantly in that special

way children do, and Divya promptly took her on an extensive tour of the house. She chattered a mile a minute, telling Shreya how her family had just moved to Singapore from India. They bumped into Divya's mum in the kitchen, who told them to help themselves to grape juice in the fridge and "play nice".

Shreya could tell Divya was just as bored as she was. So she happily sucked on her straw as they worked their way to the top of the house, more than happy to keep this friendly girl entertained.

Up the staircase they went, heading for the third floor. The layout of the house was a mirror image of Shreya's. But unlike the two rooms that were on her third floor, this house only had one colossal room. On a large table near the doorway was a little altar. On it were the statues of Saraswati, the goddess of music, and Nataraja, the god of dance. Both statues were well-polished and wore garlands of fresh flowers. The lit incense produced copious amounts of smoke. Shreya was surprised at its scent; it was a lot sweeter than what she was used to.

Ahead of her, Divya was tugging hard at the door handle. Holding on to it with both hands, she leaned back then lifted her toes off the floor to add some extra force. The door barely budged.

"It was made to be extra heavy so that the sound wouldn't travel out. Help me open it."

Shreya wanted to ask what she meant by sound travelling out. Instead, she lined herself next to Divya, their small hands easily finding space on the large handle. Divya counted down and together they slowly pulled the door open.

Divya hadn't been kidding about the weight of the door; it was easily four times thicker than the ones in her house. They were able to open it just enough for the two of them to squeeze into the dark room. Shreya heard Divya fumbling along the wall, then a sharp click and the lights blazed on.

The room looked much like the dance studio at her school, though it was smaller. There were floor-to-ceiling mirrors along

the wall at the front of the room. Light grey panels covered the other three walls. Divya later told her that they were acoustic panels; they helped the player to hear the tone of each note clearly and kept out extraneous sounds.

In the centre of the room was an elevated platform covered in a deep red carpet. On it were Indian classical instruments.

“Do you recognise any of these?”

“Yes,” Shreya said. “My teacher taught us to identify most of them.”

She pointed out the mridangam, sitar, pump organ table and veena by name, but failed to identify the rest. Divya named the rest of the instruments for her, jabbering on about how her parents were teaching her to play them all. But it all fell on deaf ears. Shreya was completely lost to the veena. It sat in the very middle of the platform, the light catching it in all the right places. The incense from outside seeped in through the cracked door, shrouding the veena in an air of magnificence and mysticism.

Shreya felt an inexplicable pull to play the instrument. She twanged one of the strings and felt the sound vibrate inside the wood. In that moment, though she had absolutely no idea how it would come to be, Shreya knew she would one day own a veena just like this. Divya’s voice broke through her reverie. Her new friend shared the veena’s long history, of how it had evolved from the simple sound of a hunter’s bow, of its interconnected relationship with Hinduism.

The bell-like chime from Shreya’s *Jurassic Park* watch snapped her back to reality. It was six in the evening. She had been at Divya’s house for well over an hour.

“I must go! Thank you for showing me all this. I hope we can play tomorrow.” With that, Shreya hurtled towards the door, taking the stairs two at a time.

After returning home three minutes later, she had to endure a scolding for the books from a panicked and furious Janaki,

who later told her parents about the little solo excursion next door. And so Shreya had to sit through yet another lecture for an insufferable amount of time. When asked what she had to say for herself at the end of it all, she simply said, “I want to learn the veena.”

It wouldn’t be the last time Shreya rendered her parents speechless.

★

“That sounds like a very special memory. Scolding and all,” Apurva said with a smile.

“Yes, it was. It felt like...like I was *supposed* to play it. Like, this was something I was supposed to pursue. If not for life, then at least in the immediate future. I was basically ready to commit to it, even though I was far too young to understand what commitment was.”

“Do you feel the same way about that moment now?”

“Mmmm, I don’t really play the veena any more, to be honest,” she said ruefully. Noticing Apurva’s questioning look she continued: “I can’t bring myself to play it any more.”

Apurva nodded with a knowing look in his eye. “That sounds like a beautiful studio to see it in for the first time. Little Shreya must have been completely blown away.”

“Little Shreya,” Shreya parroted with a laugh. “I wonder how many more versions of myself I will see before the day is up,” she mused. “Actually, yeah, you’re right. I’d never even heard a veena when I first saw it, yet somehow I knew exactly what it would sound like. I knew it wouldn’t be as high-pitched as the violin or as low as the bass. That there would be an altogether different quality to the sound. I don’t know how but I just knew. So when I plucked the string for the first time and the sound was exactly what I’d imagined, I was surprised and then...calm. And that gave me

a huge feeling of hope and purpose...like I had found my place in the world in some way. The veena gave me a sense of belonging.”

“So, that,” she said pointing at her younger self, “that moment is everything. I’d come full circle. From seeing one to owning one. It felt like I was meant to own *that* particular veena. Like it was made with me in mind. This is going to sound weird but I bonded with it instantly. I was its player just as much as it was my instrument.”

Apurva smiled at her gently. “That’s not weird at all, my dear. In fact, it’s incredible that you felt such strong feelings for it at such a young age.” There was a pause before he continued with “What happened to Divya?”

“They moved away. I know!” she said when Apurva looked surprised. “They built such a beautiful studio, and then up and left. They were gone barely a week after I met her. They had to go back to India urgently, though I never found out why.”

“Interesting,” Apurva said.

Younger Shreya broke out of her reverie and bounced up. Carefully setting her new veena into its velvet-lined case, she picked up her father’s credit card and headed to his home office.

“The plot is moving again,” Apurva said, reaching for her hand.

Older Shreya swallowed hard. She knew what was coming and she didn’t particularly care to revisit it. This memory was a tree that she had tried repeatedly to uproot. Eventually, she had simply thrown the proverbial blanket over it and continued on with life as if it wasn’t there. Now the blanket was about to be yanked off, and on top of exposing the tree, there would be stadium lights bearing down on it, making sure that it would be all she’d see.

“Remember that you have already lived this memory. This is just your chance to address your feelings with regards to this moment, gain a different perspective and learn something a little more. I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you but do try and relax; you’re about to break all my fingers,” Apurva said.

“Oh sorry,” Shreya mumbled, letting go at once. She clasped

her fingers together, nervously bouncing up and down.

Apurva summoned the bench again and told her to sit. “Try and relax,” he repeated.

Younger Shreya was calling for Appa.

Paatti emerged from the kitchen. “What do you want with your father?” she asked, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“I need to return the credit card,” she said, holding it up.

“Ah. You know, ma, you frightened that man out of his skin. It was quite a sight. I don’t think he’ll ever try to dump another poorly-made product on anyone else for as long as he lives.”

“Excellent. Then my work here is done,” younger Shreya said with a cheeky bow.

Paatti smiled. “I heard you play a little just now. It sounds beautiful. *You* make it sound beautiful. You should be very proud of yourself, Shreya. I can’t wait to hear you play next week.”

“Thanks, Paatti. I know I should be nervous but I’m really not.”

“It means you’re ready.”

“I worry that I’m just being overconfident.”

Paatti leaned in close to her, “The difference between overconfidence and being ready is the level of preparation. You’ve practised and practised in your classes and lessons till your fingers were raw. You should’ve had a veena years ago, but perhaps all that waiting was so this particular one would come to you.”

“Yes. Appa took a lot of convincing.”

Paatti’s mouth stretched into a sad smile at this. “Yes. He did.” Cocking her head to the side, she said, “I think I just heard his door open. He must have finished whatever he was doing. It’ll be a good time to catch him. And don’t forget to thank him.”

Before younger Shreya could make her way to his office, Appa was already in the doorway, looking at her with his bushy black eyebrows raised.

“Here you go,” she said softly, holding out the credit card tentatively.

“Oh right,” he muttered, shoving it back into his wallet. “Well? Is it done?”

“Yes.”

Appa nodded once and walked towards the kitchen.

“I just wanted to say thanks...you,” she added hastily.

“Well, you are welcome. Are you happy with it?”

“Yes. It’s perfect.”

“See? Told you that man knew what he was saying.”

“Actually, he didn’t. I made him get a different one from his van. That one was perfect.”

Appa was responding to a text on his phone. “Oh, yes. Good,” he said vaguely.

“So, yes. Thank you.”

“Hmm... Oh, yes. Well. Your mother was going on and on about it. You know how she can get. Seemed better for the sake of peace,” Appa said.

“Oh.”

Younger Shreya seemed to deflate at this revelation. Appa didn’t notice.

“Anyway, good luck with the practising. Tell your mother I’m going out with Uncle Ravi for a while.”

Younger Shreya took a deep breath before rushing her words out. “Appa. Wait. I just really want you to know... I really appreciate you buying this for me. I know it isn’t cheap but I love playing the veena. It makes me feel like I have a place in the world.” Noticing her father’s eyebrows raise at this, she continued hastily. “The point is, I’m very grateful. And I can’t wait for you to finally hear me at the recital next week. I’ve been practising like crazy during class and now I can practise even more at home. And it’s all thanks to you.”

Appa frowned, seemingly unable or unwilling to make sense of what his daughter had said. “Yes, you’ve said thank you a few times already.”

“I’m...just really grateful,” she said, spreading her hands as if to emphasise the sentiment.

“I see. Anyway, I won’t be there next week. Your brother has a game. It’s the qualifying round for the local amateur league and I don’t want to miss it. Amma, Paatti and Janaki will be at your recital. Even Uncle Ravi, Auntie Bhairavi and their children are going. So you see, you’ll have more people supporting you than your brother. It’s only fair I be there for him. Well, I best be off,” he said, patting down his moustache.

“Wait. What. You’re not coming?”

“No. I just explained why. You really must listen more, Shreya.”

Older Shreya gritted her teeth and clenched her toes at his hypocrisy. Even with the passing of so many years, the words still hurt. Apurva covered her hand with his, squeezing gently.

“But that doesn’t make sense. Dhiren told me he wasn’t going to play the game. He wants to attend my performance,” younger Shreya said with a look of building consternation.

“No. I convinced him otherwise. The boy can be so foolish sometimes. Imagine skipping a game to go to a veena recital. I never heard of such a thing.”

“Why not? It’s my first solo recital *ever*. I’ve been playing for five years without a single solo recital because a prerequisite of being able to do so is to have my own instrument. But I didn’t, so I couldn’t. Now that I finally have one, I can actually play for everyone and you’re choosing to go to yet another one of Dhiren’s games? You must have gone for at least a hundred by now!”

“Watch your tone,” Appa said sharply. “Dhiren’s games are important. And it isn’t my fault you didn’t have a veena before. At any rate, it isn’t even a solo recital. You just have a tiny little solo bit while performing with the rest of your little classmates.”

“So? *That* makes it unimportant?”

“Watch your tone, Shreya.”

But younger Shreya was ballooning with the intensity of her

emotions. “For your information, it is absolutely your fault that I didn’t have a veena for five whole years despite attending two lessons a week the whole time. I’ve been asking you for one for my birthday or for when I got straight As. But it’s always been a no, even though you spend hundreds of dollars on Dhiren’s football crap every month. And you’ve been doing that since he was seven!” Shreya seethed. Her body was pulled taut, as if the force of these words required all the energy she had. “And you *finally* caved but only because Amma made you?! How do you think that makes me feel? Why is Dhiren’s game so much more important than my recital? Why do you always prioritise him? It’s not like I’m awful and my playing sounds like...like nails on a chalkboard. I’m good, Appa! I’m really, really good!”

Appa glared down at her. Eyes wide, phone hanging at his side. His cheeks were flushed.

“You need to watch your mouth, young lady. You might speak like this to your mother but you will not do the same to me. Dhiren’s games are more important than your recital because his playing could actually build him a future. What is your silly veena playing going to do?” he said with a dismissive hand. “Maybe you’ll teach it on the side part-time in the future but that’s it. You’re not going to become anything of note with this. It’s probably just going to wind up in a corner, gathering dust and be yet another thing that we have to find space for. Just like all those shampoo and soap bottles in your bathroom. You’ve proven to be incapable of seeing through what you begin. I can only thank God that both my children didn’t turn out that way.”

Younger Shreya staggered back a step at the slap of his words. She looked like a balloon that had been punctured. The joy of holding her first veena had been knocked right out of her. Then like a switch being flipped, she exploded.

“YOU ARE SO MEAN TO ME! I’VE BEEN LEARNING THIS FOR FIVE WHOLE YEARS AND NOT ONCE HAVE YOU ASKED HOW I’M DOING

WITH IT. NOT ONCE HAVE YOU EVEN OFFERED TO PICK ME UP AFTER CLASS. I’VE SHOWED JUST AS MUCH DEDICATION AS DHIREN HAS WITH HIS STUPID FOOTBALL. WHAT MAKES HIM BETTER THAN ME? WHAT MAKES HIS EFFORT MORE MEANINGFUL THAN MINE? WHAT?!”

Younger Shreya ran out of breath. Her chest heaved and then caved in. She sank onto the bottom of the steps. She looked hollow and weak. As if all the anger she had been holding inside had finally been released and in its stead there was just emptiness. The house was still. Her father looked like he was barely breathing and all the usual sounds of people being home and going about their day had ceased. She sensed Paatti was somewhere around, and she caught a whiff of Dhiren’s cologne. But still, she felt totally alone.

“I don’t understand what I did to offend you,” she continued, softer. “Why do you treat me so dismissively? Everything I do is insignificant to you. I’m a straight A student. I’m on the student council. I don’t stay out late. Why do you still treat me like I’m something disgusting you stepped in?”

“I do *not* treat you that way. Don’t be so dramatic, Shreya. I’m not that much of a monster.”

“Why do you do that? Write off my feelings and my thoughts as being dramatic or just plain wrong? Is it so difficult to imagine that I am just expressing how you make me feel?”

“You don’t deserve to be spoken to nicely when you’ve yelled at your father like that. If you want to say something to me, you say it respectfully. We can always talk—”

Younger Shreya laughed at this. “We barely acknowledge each other and you want me to come to you respectfully? Like that would ever happen. No, Appa. This is the extent of our conversation. Anger and more anger.”

“Okay, Shreya. Make all the decisions you want. This started because of the recital. I’m not going. I’m going for your brother’s game. It’s an important one. Your mother will record the recital on her phone. I will come back and watch it. That is my final

offer,” he said as he reached for his car keys and patted his pockets searching for his wallet.

“Ram, I don’t think you should leave now,” Paatti said, emerging from the uncharacteristically quiet kitchen. “Finish the conversation with Shreya. Maybe you can talk about this tension between the two of you...figure it out, solve it. My heart hurts hearing this. It is not good...”

“No, Amma. I need to meet Ravi.”

“Ravi can wait, pa.”

“Appa...we can go for the recital,” Dhiren said from the landing on the stairs. He had come out of his room when Shreya started yelling. His face was pinched. “I talked to coach last week. He said it’s fine if I skip this one because he was going to give the newer players a little more field time, anyway. Get them comfortable, you know.”

“Enough! We’re going for your game. This is a bloody ridiculous reaction over a veena recital. Those recitals always sound the same and they go on for hours. It is not in my realm of interest and that is that. This conversation is over.”

Appa stormed to the front door and slammed it shut behind him.

The slam echoed through the house, making the following silence seem louder than everything that had just transpired. Eventually, Paatti broke the spell. “Shreya, ma...” she began.

“It’s okay, Paatti. I just want to go to my room. I’m sorry you had to see that,” she said. She collected the veena and headed up the stairs with the air of one who had gotten used to defeat. Dhiren reached out to her but she shrugged him off.

The sound of her softly shutting her bedroom door echoed down the stairs.

“That was difficult to watch,” Apurva said softly.

Older Shreya nodded wordlessly. “Are we done? Can we go?”

“Not yet, my dear. Something else requires our attention first.”

Paatti was lowering herself onto the stairs. Dhiren joined her. For a while, they remained silent.

Paatti exhaled noisily. “I don’t know, pa. This is so upsetting. Your little sister looks so hurt. And your father isn’t trying hard enough with her.”

It was Dhiren’s turn to exhale forcefully. “It’s all my fault.”

“How?”

“I should have just given up football long ago. I knew that Appa was paying me more attention than her because of it, but I still continued. And that isn’t fair. I should have stopped playing.”

“Nonsense, Dhiren. No one expects you to give up football just so your father will spend more time with Shreya. You don’t have to sacrifice what you love doing. This problem between him and Shreya is just that: between them. Hopefully, they’ll sort it out before Shreya finishes school.”

“But that’s the thing, Paatti. I don’t love football. I barely like it,” Dhiren said in frustration. “In fact, it’s more like I tolerate it. It keeps me in shape and there are some guys on the team who have become good friends. But the reason I hung on for so long was because it seemed to be so important to Appa, and it became this bonding activity for the two of us. It’s nice, you know. Having a relationship with him. I can talk to him and ask him for advice. I just want Shreya to have the same thing.”

“Why have you never told him how you feel?” Paatti asked in surprise.

“I don’t know...well, no. I do know. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“You’re a good son, Dhiren. And a good brother. I hope you remember to be this kind to yourself when the time comes,” Paatti said, rubbing the back of his head.

Dhiren just stared down at the floor.

I’ve never seen that look on his face before...he looks almost ashamed.

“What are we going to do about them?” Dhiren asked.

“I don’t know. Things have to calm down first.”

“That might take a while.”

“Building a family relationship takes a lot of patience. Fifty-eight years with your grandfather taught me that. Patience... and vulnerability. It’s amazing what can be resolved if people are willing to show up with their ego absent and their hearts on their sleeves.” She tried to get up, giving up after two attempts. “It’s no good, my knees are gone. Help me up, pa. Not a word of this to your mum yet. You hear me? It will come out in time. Let at least one person have a good Sunday.”

Dhiren was reaching for his grandmother when Apurva wrapped his hand around Shreya’s elbow. “Now, we can go,” he said and Shreya silently surrendered to the now-familiar backward pull.

chapter 6

LIMBO

“I NEED A minute,” Shreya said.

She pulled away from Apurva and headed for the back porch. Reappearing in the same house over and over again in different scenarios and settings while surrounded by different versions of herself and her family was giving her a weird sense of island fever. She desperately needed a change of scenery, even if it was nothing but swirling grey fog.

She settled down in one of the four big wicker chairs that her parents had received as a housewarming gift, and pulled her feet up. She needed a quiet minute to go over what had transpired and to marvel at the extent of her selective memory.

She remembered well the hurt that she felt that day. She remembered the rage that had bubbled up within her at his indifference. She had felt ignored, demeaned and, worst of all, unloved. She remembered not leaving her room for the rest of day, barricading herself in, not wanting to face anyone. She had so looked forward to finally playing the veena, *her* veena, as soon as she had woken up that morning but she hadn’t touched it in the immediate aftermath of the fight with her father. She couldn’t bring herself to do it. She had felt defeated.

What she didn't remember was her own words. She didn't remember yelling at Appa, didn't remember that she too had said some cruel things. She had always put all the blame on him for how unhealthy things were between them but she had never accepted any of the responsibility herself. It never even occurred to her that she had to.

Plus, to make things worse, the exchange between Dhiren and Paatti made her almost nauseous. Despite knowing that they had been there too, she'd barely taken their thoughts and feelings into account. She hadn't even bothered to check up on the two of them the next day. She had been too caught up in her own narrative to wonder how it must have been for them on the sidelines. For the first time, she considered what it must have been like for the rest of her family, having to always defuse the tension that crept in whenever she and Appa were around each other.

"Urgh, I don't even know how this started." She ran her hands over her face in tiredness and frustration.

On cue, she heard footsteps and the gentle movement of heavy jewellery. "Minute's up!" Apurva said cheerily as he came through the doors. He was carrying the biggest tea set she had ever seen. A tea set—which definitely did not belong to her family—that seemed more befitting of the Queen of England and the Sultan of Brunei during a state visit. The teapot looked ancient, a fragile eggshell-coloured ceramic with a small blue diamond on its lid, serving as the handle. The teacups looked to be made of burnished bronze. There was also a "simple" pot of coffee that looked to be made of solid gold, flasks with mother-of-pearl handles holding different juices, an intricately detailed jug containing some sort of lassi and two large tumblers of water. There were two fingerbowls of water mixed with mint leaves and lemon slices. A dozen Indian sweet treats were stacked in little glass bowls one on top of the other. The whole lot sat on a truly enormous wooden tray of a slightly reddish hue. Apart from the ladoos and jalebis, Shreya

didn't recognise much else, though it all looked and smelled delicious. On cue, she felt her stomach rumble and her mouth fill with saliva.

How long has it been since I last ate?

"Isn't that heavy?"

"Not really. Come, eat. It is Deepvali, after all."

"This looks amazing," Shreya said, not knowing where to begin. Her eyes danced over the selection.

"Thank you. It's one of my favourite kalas—one of the arts," he clarified when she looked at him in confusion.

"This is one of the arts?"

"Of course. Food is indispensable to every culture. It's such an integral part of cultural identity. And besides, *how* it is prepared is just as important as *what* is prepared. It's how we show love and respect and, by extension, ourselves. Particularly, how we welcome people into our homes and make them feel cared for. It helps us connect with each other."

"Guess I never thought of it that way," Shreya said as she took a bite out of a paalgova, a powdery white cube that tasted like milk. She let out a groan of contentment.

Apurva placed a teacup in front of her. "Would you like some masala tea again?"

Not wanting to cover him in fine white dust, she sealed her lips into a thin line and nodded vigorously. Apurva laughed. "I made it a little stronger this time. It seems to revive you and we still have quite a way ahead of us."

Damn. I was hoping we'd be about done.

The tiniest little sifter was placed on top of the teacup before he poured out the tea. The sifter caught the larger chunks of cardamom, ginger and cinnamon. Shreya peered into the sifter, trying to determine the special ingredient he claimed to use.

"Don't bother. You'll never guess it," he said, swiftly removing the sifter and magically making it disappear. After that, there was

not much talk except for the passing of food and drink. For the first time that day, she felt truly at ease. Even if the company she kept was a celestial musician and a bunch of limbo-fog.

“How are you feeling?” Apurva asked a little while later.

“Just...processing everything.” Shreya tugged at her cuffs. “I guess I didn’t know that I was so angry too. I knew I was, of course. But I didn’t know I was *that* angry. And I feel like I made it hard to have a conversation. And I feel so guilty! Not just because of that. But also because Dhiren felt so bad about it. Like he was responsible for it. And he isn’t! He never was! But somehow, everything I did and said seemed to do the most amount of damage to him. I feel like an ass.”

She leaned her head back, not wanting to cry.

“Tell me, what happened in the week leading up to the recital?”

“I kept away from him. I spent more time practising the veena... I’m pretty sure I didn’t speak to anyone all that much.”

“That must have felt lonely. Who turned up for the recital?”

“Amma, Paatti, Uncle Ravi and his family. Uncle Ravi’s little boy actually came up on stage after my performance with this huge bouquet of sunflowers. They were bigger than him! It was really cute,” she said with a small smile. Vignesh had almost fallen over from the weight of the flowers; Shreya had caught him just in time.

“Actually, I started playing the veena a lot less after the recital.” Feeling yet another twinge of guilt, she hastened to explain herself. “I had finals coming. Then that ended and all I wanted to do was watch TV and sleep in and hang out with my friends. You know, just do all the things we couldn’t do when studying was the singular priority. Then the year ended and it was time to prepare for the next one. And the veena started getting lost in the shuffle. There were so many new things to adapt to and I didn’t have much time left to play it.”

“So when did you completely stop?”

“After Dhiren...left.”

Apurva nodded once. Shreya fidgeted nervously in her seat. “Why are you so interested with my playing?”

“Do you know what a calling is?”

“Isn’t that something to do with someone’s career? Like people who have a strong urge to get involved with helping people through social work or nursing or something.”

“Not quite. A lot of people believe that a calling is purely job or profession related. But a calling can be felt in almost any area, and I do mean *any area*. A calling is anything that someone feels almost magnetically pulled towards. They might try to deny it or focus their energies on something else—like a job—that they deem more important. But that calling will continue to be there, just under the surface or at the back of that person’s mind, quietly waiting to be acknowledged.”

He took a sip of tea and then continued.

“Everyone has a calling, even in this human existence. Doing something for the simple love of it adds joy to you and to everyone around you. There are obvious callings: people who are great with other people, able to influence them positively or even lead them fearlessly. Or those who are great artists or philosophers. Or great parents. A calling could manifest in baking, teaching, painting, training dogs, writing, singing, dancing, running marathons, even birdhouse building. Literally anything. It’s something that someone does that makes them so happy, so joyful, that they vibrate a light out into the universe. And of course, as you have realised for yourself Shreya, when you love doing something simply for the act of doing it, you’ll usually find that you’re pretty good at it.”

Shreya absorbed his words, turning them over in her mind. “That makes sense, I guess,” she said.

“This calling, this thing that we enjoy doing simply to do it, generates love. It unlocks a special part of you that connects with

the energy and the divinity around us.”

“So a calling helps to connect with...stuff?”

“Yes...think of it as energy. It helps us to feel deeper and live in harmony with the love that constantly surrounds each and every one of us. We always have access to it, though pain and struggle sometimes make us forget. The calling helps us remember and connect.”

The fog swirled a little slower now. Shreya mulled over her tea, sipping it down to the dregs.

I've never heard it put like that before.

Apurva was running his thumb over the smooth bronze band that dangled from his wrist. It was a little too big and looked like it had Sanskrit words carved into it. Shreya watched him toy with the bracelet, deep in thought.

“What’s the story with that bracelet?”

“What makes you think there’s a story?” he asked.

“You’re covered in a billion-dollars worth of jewellery, but you seem to prize that plain bronze bangle the most. There must be a story behind it.”

“Does it surprise you that I love this piece the most?”

“Not at all. Cost and value are two very different things.”

Apurva’s eyebrows shot up. Then he started laughing. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you? Very well, I’ll tell you the bangle’s tale.”



Apurva was born in the Court of Gods as a celestial musician. From a young age, he was trained in weaponry, martial arts and musical instruments. The combination of these skills was meant to create true balance in a ghandarva, one who did not prefer any of the skills over the other and could flow seamlessly between them all. Most ghandarvas, and their female counterparts the

apsaras, picked up the skills quickly. By the seventh year of life, they would have mastered all instruments, weapons and fighting styles. At this point, they started training with the adults and were expected to behave like mature individuals, deciding between the best battle strategies and musical compositions with equal ease. Apurva had been the only one in his year who had struggled.

He’d picked up all the skills that were necessary and went through the character-building motions of rigorous training, discipline and practice. But he didn’t enjoy it. It was simply something he had to do, much like going to school for the children of Earth. Unlike his peers, who revelled in the learning, Apurva simply focused on getting through the classes, lessons and tests. He didn’t think it was a waste of time because he understood that learning these skills was imperative. But he did find the thought of doing this for the rest of his time rather depressing.

As he got older, a quiet desperation grew within him. He started spending less time with his peers and more time alone. Not being able to share their robust enthusiasm made him feel disconnected and alone. He spent more time eating by himself and wandering the vast grounds when there were no lessons. He started worrying if there was something a little wrong with him. His teachers noticed the change in his attitude but Apurva dodged their questions and concerns, insisting that he was fine.

One day, he was summoned by the Head Teacher into his office.

The Head Teacher’s office was a private garden with a desk in a corner and rugs and cushions strewn on the ground as a makeshift seating area. There was a low table in the centre with a steaming pot of tea and a few dainty ceramic cups. Apurva bowed to the Head Teacher and then settled down among the cushions, wondering if he was in trouble. Few were summoned to his private office.

“Do you know why I called you here today?” the Head Teacher asked.

“No, sir. Am I in trouble?”

“Nothing like that. But we have noticed that something seems to be *troubling* you.”

“Oh. It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t seem like nothing. You can talk openly here, Apurva. It seems like you need someone to unload on or seek advice from. I won’t be able to give you either unless you tell me.”

Apurva fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. He thought of making up an excuse and leaving. But the Head Teacher’s eyes looked serenely into his own and he felt compelled to reveal his secret.

“I don’t enjoy the lessons,” he blurted out.

The Head Teacher looked puzzled.

“And?” he probed.

“That’s not good. All the other students seem to enjoy it so much. I just don’t feel the same way.”

“My dear boy! Is this why you have been walking around in this shroud of sorrow for the past few months?”

Apurva nodded slowly.

“Well, then. Come with me. There is something you need to see.”

Apurva followed the Head Teacher in confusion, wondering if his punishment was going to be something other than writing lines or reciting verses. They walked past all the smaller private offices and entered the training arena. The sounds of swords clanging against each other and arrows thudding into targets full of hay filled the air and then dissipated behind them as they moved into the practice studios. String instruments and drums could be heard. There was a festival coming up and the rooms were packed with students and teachers. The rehearsals seemed pointless to Apurva. Every note they produced sounded divine.

They kept walking. Housing, bathrooms, kitchens, dining halls and finally the Great Library. It was more than just a place that housed books. It was a separate building, away from all the

clamour. It consisted of five floors and each floor was dedicated to a different specialisation. There was the actual library, a painting studio, a soundproof carpentry workshop, a sculpting room and an astronomical observatory on the top floor. Apart from the initial orientation process, Apurva had never thought to return. He had been too wrapped up in worrying about keeping up with his classmates.

The place buzzed with focused activity, though it was far different than what he had gotten used to in the noisy jarring training grounds. The atmosphere here was quieter and more concentrated, each person involved in a task that they were completely absorbed in.

“I am sure you remember this place,” the Head Teacher said as he nodded at the students who vaulted out of their seats to bow to him as they walked by. “The Great Library. Most of the ghandarvas and apsaras come here on orientation and never set foot in it again, too entranced by the beauty of music and the dance of weaponry. And who can blame them? It is in their very essence. Yours as well, Apurva. You may not be the best in these areas but you have been trained well and it shows.”

“But I don’t love it like the rest of them do. They’re all still enthusiastic about each lesson. I don’t want to spend the rest of my time dragging my feet back and forth.”

“No one expects you to only dedicate yourself to this one area. There is so much more to our existence than what is traditionally expected of us. Finding what you enjoy doing is part of getting comfortable in your skin. If you had told someone about this sooner, you would not have had to suffer for so long. Cutting yourself off from people also meant that you cut yourself off from solutions and ideas.”

“Oh,” Apurva said, seeing his self-induced isolation from a different perspective for the first time.

The Head Teacher led him to the end of the first floor and

handed him a stack of parchment. “Here. These are some extra lessons that I want you to take. You are not to go back to your usual training until you find something that you enjoy doing.”

“Why?”

“Because you feeling this way means that you won’t be performing at your best. We need each one of you at your best. And right now, the only thing that can get you there is for you to feel good about yourself again. So, find it, Apurva. Trust me, it won’t be difficult.” The Head Teacher patted him on the shoulder and left, the ends of his deep burgundy robes trailing behind him.

The Head Teacher had been wrong about one thing though. He had envisioned that Apurva would take a few weeks before finding his calling. As it turned out, his calling revealed itself to him on that very day.



“I remember that pull when I entered the sculpting room. It was full of people creating little statues or ornaments or pots. Just about anything, really. And all from these great blocks of material. These things they created, they came to be only *after* it was already seen in their minds. They were already in existence; it was just about chipping away the extra material till it could also be seen by others. It was incredible to imagine and even more spectacular to behold. I watched a girl slowly sculpt a statue of a goddess out of a block of marble. I wanted to do that, and in a strange way, I *knew* I could do that. So I did.”

He held up the arm with the bangle. “This is the first thing I ever created. I used an unnecessarily large block of bronze. The instructor who oversaw the studio almost had a fit seeing how much bronze I wasted to create one tiny little bangle. I got a good lecture for that, of course. I had to clean the stables for a month but it didn’t take away from the specialness of the moment. I had

created something with my bare hands. Something that had only existed in my mind was now a real physical thing. This wouldn’t have existed without me. It made me feel—”

“Empowered.”

Apurva nodded in agreement, taking a sip of tea before continuing. “Within two weeks I was back at the daily trainings. But unlike all the previous times, I felt invigorated. I was more focused and learned quicker. I became a stronger fighter and gained more understanding with the instruments. Being able to express myself and *be* myself had changed the painful areas in my life. Forever.”

He paused again, looking at Shreya thoughtfully before continuing.

“There are hundreds of ghandarvas and apsaras going through their basic training at any one time. When the Head Teacher called me in for a follow-up, I asked why he had singled me out. There were certainly other more important things for him to focus his attention on. Why attend to me?”

“What did he say?”

“He said that any ghandarva or apsara in struggle affected all of us. That we were only as strong as our weakest member. That in order to be truly free from suffering, we must all help our brothers and sisters to be free from suffering as well.”

“But that’s impossible...there’s always going to be suffering. There’s so much pain in the world. Pain that my hurt can never compare to.”

“Yes. But we can certainly affect it by taking care of ourselves and doing what we can for those around us. That’s the thing about me being here. I can’t help your entire family but I can help you. And if at the end of all this you’re able to shed the hurt you’ve been carrying with you for all these years, perhaps you’ll be able to do the same for your family. We pay it forward. We feel compelled to help someone when we ourselves have been selflessly

supported. Or rather, loved.”

“And you’re saying that the veena can somehow help me.”

“Yes and no. You were lucky enough to come across the veena at such a young age. You never struggled to keep up with it or found it tedious to practise because you loved it. It was your calling. When you played it, how did you feel?”

“Calm...it made me feel calm.”

“Was your mind ever elsewhere when you were playing the veena?”

“No...there was no need to be elsewhere. I loved where I was in that moment.”

“Exactly. That is a calling. It might not be something that earns money or brings you fame, but it is something that keeps you in the moment and fills you with joy. It allows you to share your light with everyone around you and by extension, the world and the universe. There is so much darkness in your world sometimes. Every bit of light that is produced is beautiful and brings some peace back. You were adding to it, Shreya. But when you stopped playing, you unknowingly added to the darkness instead of adding to the light. You increased your own suffering.”

“So I just have to start playing again and I’ll be fine?”

“Not quite. What is more important now is for you to heal. Tough questions need to be asked and old wounds have to be addressed first. If you jump back in and start playing, it won’t be long before you give up again.”

Shreya nodded mechanically as she rubbed her temples. *I don’t get it. How is this all interconnected? It all seems so random...*

Apurva looked at her keenly. Shreya wondered if he was reading her thoughts again. Not that it mattered. They sat in silence in the grey fog. She, lost in her thoughts, and he, patiently waiting for her to work through all the tangles.

“Are you ready for the final memory?”

“Is it the last one of the day?”

“No, my dear. It is not. But it is the last one *I’ll* be showing you.”

“Who will be showing me the rest?” Shreya asked. She didn’t want him to leave. His presence was comforting. She had gotten used to it. She didn’t even mind that he could read her thoughts. It was easy being open with her feelings and ideas with him, something she hadn’t been able to do in a long time.

“You’ll see,” he said with an encouraging smile.

She sighed deeply and let go of her numerous questions. The day was out of her control. All she could do was ride the wave till it took her to shore.

“Where are we going?”

“I think you mean *when*, actually. To Deepavali 2016.”

Shreya hung her head, her body sagging. “I really don’t want to see that. It’s too much. I’m so ashamed.”

“Which is exactly why you need to, my dear. Strength comes from facing our fears. And you have plenty of strength even if you don’t feel it right now.”

It was pointless. She had known this moment was coming from the moment Apurva had explained his presence to her. She had to re-live it. Perhaps it was what she deserved.

He held both her hands tightly and then closed his eyes, propelling them back two years. In the time it took her to blink just once, her surroundings had changed again. She was standing outside her front door with the gigantic colourful kolam from the 2016 celebrations leering up at her. It was still intact. She had forgotten what it had looked like before it had been destroyed. She held Apurva’s hand tight and followed him into her worst memory.



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