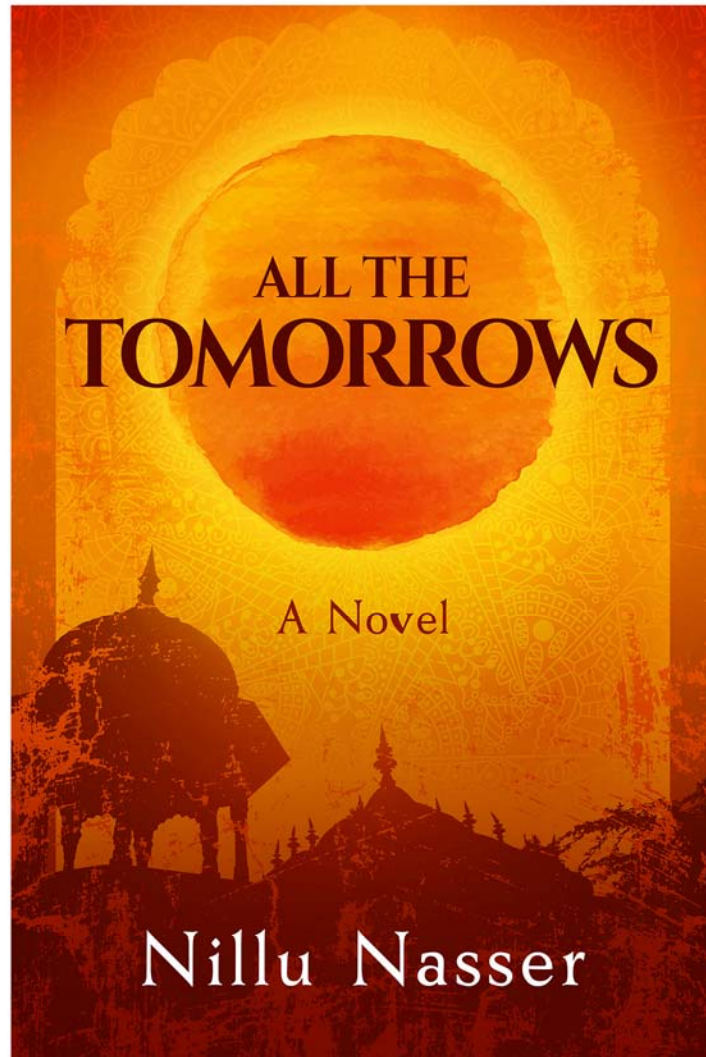


# ALL THE TOMORROWS



**NILLU NASSER**

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**\*\*\* SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW FILE\*\*\***

**ALL THE TOMORROWS**

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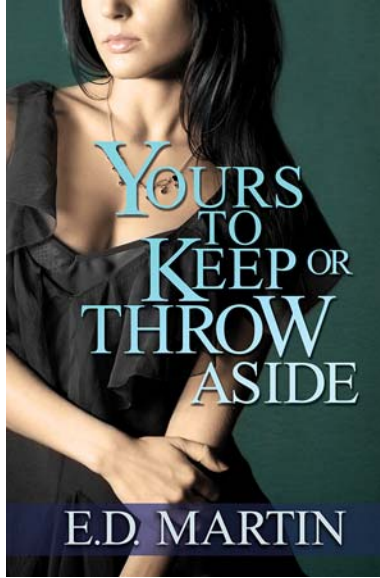
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## BONUS CONTENT

We're pleased to offer you a Special Sneak Preview at the end of this book. In that preview, you'll enjoy the First 3 Chapters of the literary/women's fiction *YOURS TO KEEP OR THROW ASIDE* by E.D. Martin. Just click on the link below the image to get your sneak peek.



[YOURS TO KEEP OR THROW ASIDE by E.D. Martin](#)

**Dedication:**

*For Jan,  
who believed and was patient.*

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## Chapter 1

The sun hung like a molten pendant on the horizon as Akash rolled away from his sleeping wife. He cursed as the bed creaked in protest, threatening to wake Jaya. He tiptoed across their bedroom, heavy with the Indian heat, and stubbed his toe in his eagerness to escape the confines of his marriage and reach his lover. In his arms he carried neatly folded clothes, and he eased through the door without a look back.

Safely on the other side of the threshold, Akash's heart rate slowed. He dressed quickly and headed out into the daylight, where honking rickshaws already jostled for space on the road despite the early hour. He threaded his way to university through littered streets, where rats the size of his forearm fought with street urchins for the right to scraps.

"Soraya." Her name felt like sherbet on his tongue.

Fifteen minutes later, he turned a corner into the university grounds, and there she sat on a bench nestled amongst roses, a woman secure in the knowledge of her own beauty and her hold on him.



The streets pulsed with people but Jaya paid no heed as she pushed on. Her husband was up to something, and today would be the day she unravelled his secret. The note she had discovered inside the door to their bedroom, the one that proved her instincts had been right, lay like a stone inside her shoulder bag. A stranger's elegant handwriting adorned its jagged form:

*7 a.m., the university rose garden*

Jaya passed street vendors blackened by the sun, selling sugared almonds and bright bags of turmeric and chilli. Thoughts tumbled through her head: how Akash stole away each morning from their marital bed, leaving her to wake alone in a house laden with silence; how he spurned her touch, making her question whether she knew how to please him; how even the liveliest conversation fell on deaf ears.

A year ago, they had been strangers; a brief introduction later, betrothed; now, husband and wife. She'd spoken to Akash only briefly before their marriage, with her mother watching intently from the sidelines. She'd searched him for a sign that everything would be all right, and had taken his silence for shyness.

*Did you ever want me, Akash?*

Her parents had ensured she understood the importance of the match for their family. Her father could no longer afford to feed them all, and if she wanted to complete her studies, the marriage was essential. She would live with her in-laws, two families would be one, and her father would no longer have to pay for her upkeep. The old way, to have a marriage arranged, suited her parents, and Jaya had agreed, determined to make it work.

The wedding had taken place in a marquee on the outskirts of Hyderabad in the height of summer. Hundreds of well-wishers had arrived in buses, dressed in sequins and bright hues, sweat-stained even before the first ceremony. Jaya's hands and feet were painted with intricate *mehndi* the colour of earth. It trailed up her arms, a tattoo proclaiming to the world that she was a bride. The *mehndi* artist, playful and coy, had hidden Akash's initials within the pattern in the crook of Jaya's arm, for her husband to find on their wedding night.

A good match, their families had said.

*Then why do I feel such distance between us?*

She wanted to hold him to account, but instead her anger ebbed and despair set in. She looked down at herself, wishing she had made herself more beautiful for him, wishing the city had not already left its mark. The dust from the Bombay streets mingled with her feet through her open-toed sandals. Chipped nails peeked from behind worn leather. At the university gates, she stopped to hand a few rupees to a street child holding a broken drum, all forlorn eyes and scraggly hair.

She forged on through the gates, her chest heavy. Her instinct told her not to question Akash, but to test him. What could he be hiding? Jaya knew one thing: she loved her husband enough to overcome anything. If even the smallest piece of him belonged to her, she could save them.

"I will find a way to make us work, Akash Choudry," she said. "Mark my words."



The lovers stood in the overgrown alcove in the rose garden. The heady fragrance of the blooms filled Akash's nostrils, competing with the scent of Soraya's newly-washed hair.

She curved her body into his, her pelvis pushing against his thighs. He closed his eyes, and she shook him, laughing lightly.

"We can't do this here. What if someone sees?" she said.

"I don't care. Let them see. This is the best part of my day."

He didn't feel guilty for his deception of his wife. He didn't care if he and Soraya received censure for their public displays of affection. Their illicit meetings brought him joy: Soraya's touch, her smell, the lilting timbre of her voice. To deny himself would have been too painful, and so, week after week, month after month, their affair had continued, wherever and whenever it could, with no regard for the vows he had taken or the damage he inflicted.

He tangled his fingers in Soraya's hair, still damp from her shower, and pulled her closer. Their lips meshed, and he savoured the plump moistness of her closed mouth, then pried it apart with his tongue.

She reached up to loop her arms around his neck, and then jerked suddenly, her fingers caught on a thorn.

"Ouch!"

He sat down on the worn bench and pulled her down onto his lap. Then he took her finger, drew it to his mouth, and gently sucked.

"Better?"

She nodded, kissed his ear, and rested her head on his.

"You know," he mumbled into soft swaths of fabric at her chest, "you are the only person I'd happily serve all my life. Did I tell you that myth I love about Arjun, the greatest archer in the world? He was equally proficient with left and right arm, trusted and loved by Krishna, a man cursed never to be king, always to serve."

Soraya groaned. "You've only told me that about a hundred times."

Footsteps sounded ahead of them, and Akash hesitated. Despite the risk of discovery, he remained reluctant to push Soraya away.

*Just a little more.*

"Akash?"

A voice he recognised.

It struck him like a whip, a note of discord on a perfect morning. He froze at first, then looked up, hoping his ears had betrayed him, that he would be able to laugh at himself for this moment of panic.

"What's going on?" His wife stood before him, eyes filling with tears. Her bag lay at her



feet, its contents spilt across the pathway. Time slowed while she looked from him to the woman on his lap, her features twisted with distress.

Akash pushed Soraya off his lap, blood rushing to his face.

“Jaya....” He stood and reached out to his wife, but she flung his hand away and pivoted, stumbling on her strewn possessions before running through the gardens, away from him, towards the throngs outside the gates.

Panic marred Soraya’s face.

“Oh God, Akash, I’m so sorry. Aren’t you going to go after her?”

He sank back onto the bench. “What would I say?”

He hung his head in his hands, reeling, unable to ignore the consequences of his actions any longer. Jaya’s pain was clear, and finally, after all this time, the consequences of his actions confronted him. How had these stolen moments with Soraya spiralled so out of control? He couldn’t put an end to their affair, even if he wanted to. He was not capable.

“Find her,” Soraya said. “Tell her you’ll make it up to her.”

He pulled her to him, the woman he had chosen, and his hands trembled as he framed her face. “I don’t want her. I didn’t choose her. I want you, Soraya. Us. This.”

Soraya set her lips. “This? This is just fun, Akash, until it’s not. Your wife *knows*. Why are you still here? We’re from different worlds, Akash. Do you really think your Hindu family would accept a Muslim wife for you? What we have – what we *had* – was good, but it was never meant to be forever. Go after your wife. Save your relationship.”

She gathered up her purse and cardigan, and reached up to kiss his cheek – perfunctory, as if they had never been lovers. As if he could fit the pieces of his life together without her as easily as a jigsaw puzzle.

Akash stood statue-like, listening to the clip-clop of her heels as she left him amongst the blooms.



“He was with another woman, Maa.”

Tears streaked down Jaya’s face in the cramped kitchen of her parents’ home. She craved comfort, but her mother had other ideas.

“Just look at all these bills piling up, Jaya. I don’t care what he has done. We cannot afford to have you back here.” She flung her hand to her forehead. “Oh, the shame of it! I will not put any more pressure on your father. You sort this out. You will not dishonour our name.”

“But Maa, I’ve been trying. For months I’ve been trying. I think he regrets ever marrying me. He’s hardly home, and now I know why. I saw his face, the way he touched her. He has never shown me such tenderness. He doesn’t want to sort this out. I just know it.” She sobbed, grasping the toilet paper her mother pushed her way.

She thought back to her wedding, to the weight of the gold-embroidered wedding sari, which had suffocated her. Their future had lain ahead, resplendent, symbolised by the heavy jewellery that adorned her and the painted elephant Akash rode. She teased him about the red turban that struggled to contain his buoyant hair, but he remained solemn. Disappointment dampened Jaya’s excitement.

The ceremony had begun, and her father, stern and upright in his *sherwani*, gave her away. *Kanyadaan*. They held their hands over the holy fire to signify their union. *Panigrahana*. Finally, Jaya followed Akash around the flames. Sanskrit washed over her as they traversed seven times around the fire, bound together, each round a promise. *Saptapadi*. After the ceremony, when the *dhol* player leapt to his rhythm, the crowd began their celebrations.

*I am yours*, she thought at that moment, *and you are mine*. She’d glanced shyly at Akash from

beneath thick lashes, careful not to be bold, but his gaze had remained fixed at a point in the distance.

Even as newly-weds, Akash rarely touched her. On their wedding night, he made no effort to find his name hidden in the curl of her wedding mehndi. His lips remained downturned, his body rigid. She feared her overtures had come across as brazen, and that Akash would be perfectly happy if she did not initiate contact. Now she knew that the closeness she craved with him, the child of her own, would never come to fruition. He remained absent, even when they occupied the same space, even when she had caught him red-handed.

Her mother continued, determined to shape her daughter into the woman she herself was. "Don't you think we all have our problems, Jaya? This is the real world. Men cheat. It's your job to make sure he plays at home. Feed him, wash his clothes, let him have his way with your body. What else are women here for?" She scrubbed the floor by the cooker where spices had fallen. When she rose, her knees were red, her eyes accusing. "It's these studies of yours. Did you want to send us into ruin? I knew it was a bad idea, giving you ideas above your station. You don't have enough time for him."

"Maa, I promise you, I wait for him there. He never comes. Where is he now? I caught him in the act, and even now he is not here."

"All I hear are excuses, Jaya. Come what may, you are not coming back into this house. Your father would be furious. What would our neighbours say? We'd be the laughing stock of the community. I can hear them now, gossiping about how we raise our daughters, how they are not even able to keep their husbands happy. And you wonder why women long for sons." Her mother drove her finger into Jaya's chest. "You make this work."

Jaya shrank back into the corner of the kitchen.

"I can't sit around here all day. I promised your father I would make him vegetable samosa, the tiny ones he likes. I need to go and get chilli and coconut for the chutney. Make yourself useful if you are here and fry the samosas, will you?" She pointed to the row of floured pastry pockets, perfect triangles filled with vegetables. "It's lucky you came. Your sister was going to do it, but the lazy girl is napping upstairs." Her mother patted her arm awkwardly. "And don't worry, you will get the hang of this."

Jaya's mother squeezed through the small archway on her way to the front door, and left without a backward glance.

Jaya followed her progress down the street, watching her mother's swaying hips through the open kitchen window. "Can I rescue us?" she asked, alone with her darkening thoughts.

She fried the samosas, watching the ghee spritz out of the pan as she worked.

*He looked so happy with her.*

Batch by batch, she continued.

*I am not enough.*

She poured more oil into the saucepan.

*Am I enough?*

After she fried the last of the samosas, she laid them out onto kitchen paper to absorb the excess moisture, and sat down heavily on a stool by the cooker.

*He still has not come to find me.*

Her bag probably lay in the rose garden where she dropped it. It would not take a great leap of faith for Akash to follow her to her parents' house. He should have come by now.

*He does not care.*

Next to her, the oil bubbled and spat.

Her eyes glazed as she took the pan off the cooker. Oil residue on the handle caused her

grip to slip. The world continued to turn – men worked, women cooked, children played – as she poured the contents of the pan slowly on the hem of her sundress, first at the front, then each side, and as far back as she could reach. She cried out as her flesh seared, but still she continued.

*It is my fault.*

The sky-blue dress darkened with the liquid, and her legs became raw where the hot oil splashed against her skin. She welcomed the physical pain.

There she stood, thinking and unthinking, playing with a box of matches from her mother's drawer.

A knock on the window startled her. Akash appeared, peering through the crack.

"Jaya, can we talk?"

She turned to look at him, a flash of colour in the dingy kitchen, her movements robotic.

"You came," she said, her voice wooden. "Do you love me?"

"I..."

"Are you here to leave me?"

"I don't know," said Akash. "Can you let me in?"

"You love her?"

"Yes." He shrank from her gaze.

Jaya barely moved. *You don't love me.* A scratching sound, and then a brief flare. "Then what else is there to say?"

Akash screamed as fire swept around the hem of her dress and the orange flowers caught alight.

*Now you have an excuse not to touch me.* She stood in the midst of it all, her face contorted as she burned. Her flesh began to melt and the tortuous flames ripped through her until there was nothing else, only agony.

*What have I done?*

She gave herself to the pain. Her skin peeled, curling, and the fire spread upwards. Shouting somewhere on the periphery of her consciousness sought to anchor her in the here and now, but she paid no heed.

The fire cleansed her.

## Chapter 2

Her skirt turned a seething red and hung in threads around her calves. For a moment, she became a goddess, but Jaya's story did not follow Hindu legend. Sita's flames bloomed into lotuses; Jaya's blazed.

She burned – for hours or perhaps a few seconds – in a hell of her own. The flesh of her legs singed as if she were a newly slaughtered lamb lain over hot charcoal. Every nerve ending protested against the onslaught. She writhed in pain, her world dissolving into one moment: this trial. Fiery teeth raked her skin, blistering her once smooth limbs, branding her with their mark. The smell of meat cooking down to the bone rushed into her nostrils and she convulsed. A warrior cry, anguished and other-worldly, erupted from her smoke-filled throat that bore no similarity to her own voice.

By the time her sister Ruhi dashed into the confines of the kitchen, Jaya had collapsed onto the floor, her lower body ablaze. She lay in a heap as Ruhi froze, horror painted on her face as she took in the angry fire licking up Jaya's legs, her nose instinctively scrunched up against the pervading smell of oil and cooking flesh in the room. Too slow, Ruhi's reaction.

A scream erupted from Ruhi. "Jaya! Jaya!"

Ruhi snapped into action, jerking a towel from the clothing rack, sending it scattering in her haste. She wrapped Jaya in it.

Jaya's mind bled.

Her sister rolled her into the living room, away from the oil remnants and the oxygen flowing in through the slither of open window. Still the flames refused to be spent. The thin, frayed towel stuck to Jaya's skin. The flames raged, like Jaya's internal world, seeking vengeance where they touched, peeling back her skin like a deft chef skinning a vegetable.

*Would Akash be sorry? Would this shame him how he deserved to be shamed?*

Her sister shuddered and covered Jaya with her own body. Jaya moaned as they rolled together amongst the legs of furniture, in sight of the altar where they prayed together, one a burning rag-doll, the other sobbing with terror.

Ruhi cursed, smothering the flames, using her own hands to pat out the fire until it died.

The armour of Jaya's sundress had almost entirely disappeared save for a panel around her singed torso. Her legs had taken the brunt of the fire. The skin bubbled and stuck fast to the towel. Soot clung to her. Beside her, the pale blue statue of Vishnu watched. His arms encircled the room. Jaya closed her eyes, the shallow inhale-exhale of her breath a roar in her mind. She sizzled, and finally, mercifully, slipped into unconsciousness.

Akash banged the window. "Jaya! Jaya! Somebody help me!"

He ran to the front door, pounded it with his fists, and tried in vain to shoulder it open. The door would not budge, and nobody came. Her screams followed him, and the stench of cooking flesh filled Akash's nostrils until the horror became too much.

He ran, the images of his burning wife searing his brain. He ran past heaving market stalls and darting rickshaws, away from the Bombay that was familiar to him, until the phlegm built up in his throat. He ran – he ran until his lungs ached and his ribcage heaved, until he reached the cooling banks of the water, where he vomited.

He stopped to lean against a wall, shaking his head to free himself of the horrors lurking there. Then he sank down and cried. Shame hung around his neck like a medallion, heavy and

cumbersome. Had Jaya really set herself alight? He squeezed his eyes shut. Perhaps if he took a deep breath and reopened them, the images would fade and he would realise it had been a nightmare.

*Is this a dream, Jaya? Did my mind play tricks on me?*

He opened his eyes as his stomach churned. Still, he could not escape the horrors of the present.

*Did I really run away from you while you burned? What kind of man am I?*

Her screams echoed in his head, and his shoulder throbbed from where he had tried to break down the door.

*I could have tried harder.*

Reality crushed him, so he retreated into hope, foolish though it was. Maybe Jaya was still alive. He could go back and try harder to make his marriage work. He could forget Soraya, but every fibre in his body protested against cutting Soraya out of his life. But neither could he forget his wife – his responsibility.

None of the blame for the disintegration of their marriage could be laid at Jaya's feet. They had both agreed to an arranged marriage. An aunt on his father's side, an insufferable woman with a hairy chin and protruding belly, had arranged for their families to meet. Jaya represented the perfect match, his father said: the right caste, elegant, unassuming, a good wife.

But Akash was not ready. Jaya's wit shamed him, as did her warm nature, so forgiving of his inadequacies. He felt as harassed by her faith as by her smiles. How could he tell his family he rejected their way, the old way?

So they married, dazed amidst excited relatives and clashing colours. Jaya became a dutiful wife; Akash an emotionally-absent husband. He went through the motions – waking up with Jaya, their bodies occupying opposing corners of the bed, attending lectures, returning home to have dinner with his wife and parents, touching his wife when the lights went out, but everything felt perfunctory rather than passionate. The foundations of their marriage had seemed irreparably damaged as his hope for the future seeped through the cracks in their relationship.

Not until he met Soraya did he realise he was capable of romantic love.

He jumped through his memories as if they were a yellowed film reel to 1980, the summer after he had married. He'd been slouching on a slow-chugging bus, seated next to Jaya, when he spotted Soraya the first time, tearing through the dusty streets towards the university gates, her hair drenched by the musty rain, her features obscured – a girl who took no prisoners. He couldn't pull his eyes away. His shirt stuck to his back in the sticky heat as Jaya's thigh pressed against his own, yet everything dropped away except for this stranger. He turned awkwardly, twisting his neck like a giraffe to watch until Soraya disappeared into a tiny speck in the distance.

From that first encounter, he'd never been able to shake the thought of her. For him, she was a promise, a drug – a slow, inescapable venom, poisoning his relationship with his wife. He felt the brush of Soraya's fuchsia scarf as she rushed past, imagined the taste of the rain on her chapped lips. Even before their affair had begun, she became a persistent ghost in his marital bed.

Their friends and family would have gasped had Akash and Jaya divorced. His parents were staunch opponents of divorce and separation. With years of a harmonious arranged marriage behind them, they would never have understood, and Akash would have been incapable of facing them if his marriage failed. A remarriage remained unthinkable unless one partner had been widowed, let alone a love match between Akash and Soraya, a Hindu and

Muslim.

*Did I really watch you burn, with only a bruised shoulder to show for it? Did I give my marriage to you a chance? Am I completely rotten to my core, incapable of loving my wife?*

Round and round his thoughts went, like a carousel.

*All you wanted was to hear I love you. I could have stopped you from lighting the match.*

He was responsible for it all, as surely as if he had lit the match himself. He clung to the hope that she might still be okay as he sat, crumpled on the pavement, one thought consuming him as daylight turned to dusk.

*I have to make this right.*



Jaya floated back into a body that did not feel like hers. She groaned as whispers and the hum of machines reached her ears, followed by her mother's voice.

"Oh, Jaya, what did you do?"

"How can one sister burn while the other sleeps?" said her sister, piercing through the haze of nothingness.

Jaya opened her eyes. The faces of her family swam before her as fluorescent hospital lighting buzzed above their heads. Her parents and her sister stood vigil at her bedside in a cramped ward. Ruhi rushed to hug her, features twisted in worry, but Jaya winced at her sister's touch. She shut her eyes and wished for darkness again. Waves of pain crashed over her like none she had experienced before, a throbbing and clenching she could not localise.

"Jaya?" said Ruhi, her voice lined with tears.

Jaya struggled to remember what had happened. She opened her eyes with trepidation and looked down at her body, still detached from the consequences of her actions. Starched hospital sheets entombed her form, and something cool lay on her legs and side. She reached under the sheets and her fingers found thick bandages. The pain of a flurry of knives shot through her. She couldn't move her legs.

Ruhi reached for her hand and said, "No, no, don't touch anything. I'll let the nurse know you're awake." Her sister's hands were wrapped in light bandages.

Jaya remembered the flames and Akash's betrayal with a rush, and cried out. She waved her hands at her family, wanting to be alone, then glanced again at Ruhi's bandages and remembered through the haze that her sister had rescued her, not Akash.

*He is not only a cheat, but a coward.*

Ruhi disappeared into the corridor.

Jaya's fingers traced her face, her heartbeat accelerating, fascination and panic interlacing, as the recent past came flooding back to her. Her face felt normal. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where am I?" The words came out as a croak.

"KB Bhabha Hospital. Do you remember what happened?" Her father's voice was heavy with sadness. He rested his hand gingerly on her arm, just above where an IV line pierced her skin.

Jaya reached for the truth but the complexity of the answer eluded her. She remembered lighting the match, but she didn't recognise the woman who would have done that. How could she not know she had been capable of such an act?

It was easier to lie. "I don't remember."

He searched her face for answers. Beside him, her mother sat still. "Was it an accident?"

"I was cooking samosas." She recalled her feeling of hopelessness, which dogged her even now. All because of Akash. She had wanted to press reset but the world had remained the same.

*I should have died.*

"My daughter, what will become of you now?" said her father. "Where is Akash?"  
*So he has not come, not even to the hospital.*

Jaya didn't respond. The skin on her legs seemed to sizzle and pulse as if she were still shrouded in flames. She longed to tear off the bandages, to see what had befallen her, to itch her skin until she found some relief. Yet the physical sensations bore no comparison to the emotional ones. She remembered Akash's face at the kitchen window.

*He left me to burn. Instead of punishing him, have I freed him to be with his lover? How can he not be sorry? If he cares at all, he would have tried to save me, and he would be at my bedside now.*

She felt his absence keenly, and the shame wrapped itself around her like a blanket of thorns. In that moment, her emotional core—the part fed by love and promise—transformed into a block of ice. What remained was simply a carcass of the woman who had stepped from her marital home that morning.

She could find no answers to soothe her parents' worries.

Ruhi hurtled into the room, followed by the more sedate entry of a doctor wearing blue scrubs and a serious expression.

The doctor pinned Jaya with a stare that stripped away her pretences. "It is good that you are awake." She turned to the rest of the family. "Can I have a few minutes alone with my patient?"

"Jaya would want us to stay," said her father, squeezing Jaya's hand.

"It really is better this way," said the doctor.

Ruhi glanced from Jaya to the doctor. "We'll be right outside," she said, and ushered her parents into the hallway.

Jaya fixed her eyes on the doctor's hair, a frizzy mop tinged with the orange of fading henna.

"I'm Dr. Tarpana. How are you feeling?"

If she had to answer questions, it relieved her the doctor happened to be female. Who knew how a man would judge her? "Uncomfortable."

Her legs had been elevated under the sheets. Their mass appeared greater than they should, even under the thick bandages, as if they belonged to someone else, someone not as slight as her. She tugged at the sheets with her hand.

Dr. Tarpana stilled her movement with her palm.

"You went through a huge ordeal. Being caught in a fire is an attack on the entire body. Can you tell me what happened?"

Jaya snatched her hand back and focused on the soot underneath her nails, uncertain of how far to trust this woman. Blisters dotted the pink skin of her palm. "I was in the kitchen cooking. The oil caught fire."

"I see." Dr. Tarpana paused. "Jaya, your sister's intervention saved your life. The burns on your legs are the ones I am most concerned about. They penetrated deep into the skin. It's going to be a long journey from here."

The words floated over her. How she wished it had been Akash who had saved her. As it stood, Jaya didn't know whether to thank Ruhi or hate her for not letting her die, but in the bright light of the hospital ward, her heart lurched to think she might never have seen her sister again. She tried to sit up, but the doctor held her in place, and her legs refused to obey. The effort caused her to cry out in pain.

"I'll get the nurse to bring you some more morphine. It's best to stay still for now, if you can. We want to inflict as little trauma to the affected areas as possible."

Jaya motioned to her shrouded legs. "They don't feel like mine."

"They're swollen. You received second degree burns to fifteen per cent of your body. We had to cut away the dead tissue and clean your wounds. We had to amputate two of your toes. The ones that survived are splinted. We've applied cooling gel and thick dressings to give your skin as great a chance of recovery as possible."

Jaya heard the words as if through a filter. Each word dipped with weight, until Jaya could no longer understand the sum of its parts. The information was too much.

*Amputation. Dead tissue. Burns.*

She jolted as the flames seared her mind, as real as the bed she lay on.

Across the ward, a man with what looked like acid burns gazed at her, pity on his face.

Dr. Tarpana's face loomed again through the haze, talking about administering electrolytes and antibiotics. She kept on, but Jaya caught only fragments. She nodded periodically, as words swirled around her: the risk of sepsis, compromised immunity, physiotherapy. This alien world was not hers. She had not caused this.

"You'll need skin grafts. We're just waiting for the theatre to be free. Massage from a professional is key. Too much contact, and we risk disturbing the healing process. Too little, and your skin and muscles will become unsupple, risking reduced mobility."

*Too much. Better to live in fantasy than to be confronted with harsh truths.*

She longed to unhear her diagnosis, but there would be no going back. She was nearly at the finish line. Surely it could not get any worse.

Jaya focused on the doctor's face, her solemnity, the steady hands in contrast to her own trembling ones. "I want to see. I want to see what I look like."

Dr. Tarpana considered her for a moment. "It's better to wait. It's too soon."

"I need to see. Please."

*All because of him, and he isn't even here. I wish he could see what he's done to me. Would he worry about me or would he wash his hands of me? Was there ever anything there?*

The doctor called a nurse, and the blood rushed into Jaya's ears. Together the doctor and nurse peeled back the sheets and removed the bandages from her legs with infinite care, first one and then the other.

Now Jaya could correlate her pain with the physical symptom. She gasped and her vision swam. A moment of disassociation: a lifetime of consequences. The smooth skin of her legs had been replaced by raw, open sores. Where her skin had been almond in colour, it was white, as though the pigment had given up in face of the onslaught, melting like a wax figure in an oven. It glistened under the harsh hospital lighting, and there was no place for Jaya to hide. Two of her toes on one foot were no longer there. She flinched from the sight, shutting her eyes, but still the image of her new body played underneath her closed lids. She willed the gods to take mercy upon her, to rewind the tape.

"Jaya," said Dr. Tarpana, bending close, trying to project empathy that failed to reach over Jaya's walls. "It might not seem like it, but you've really been very lucky. The fire has done minimal damage to your muscles. Much depends on how fast your body heals, but I see no reason why you won't be able to continue life as you know it."

Jaya blinked her eyes open. Her wounds remained. Her foot did not magically become whole. She could not imagine a humdrum life like her mother's, one borne of duty rather than passion. She had never wanted a pale imitation of love, and now even that had been axed from her life. She had wanted change. Couldn't fire bring renewal? Instead, she had fuelled the flames. Who would want her now? "Life as I know it? My life is over. What have I done?"



### Chapter 3

Tears of grey clouds lay scattered across the horizon and daylight slipped away as Akash returned to his in laws' house in Bandra. Market-trading had ended and the streets were emptying. Resistance and hope weighed down each step he took. Perhaps Jaya had just wanted to frighten him. Perhaps she had flung off her clothes and survived. His fear roped around his neck and clung fast, tight and unyielding. He approached the window he had been at hours previously. There, through the glass in the half-light, he saw the blackened floor, and just beyond, Jaya's mother, weeping at Lord Vishnu's shrine, wringing her hands. She collapsed in a heap on the floor as Akash watched, her face scrunched up with sorrow.

*No. It can't be.* Bile filled Akash's mouth.

A man loomed into view, a hair's breadth away, breaking Akash's sightline to the mourning older woman. His father-in-law's usually neat hair lay dishevelled against his forehead. Bloodshot eyes pulsed in anger as they met his own. The old man drew his finger to lips and motioned with a cocked head to the front door.

Akash crossed to the entrance, his head clouded with horror.

The door drew open, and Jaya's father stepped outside into the balmy evening. He stood a head taller than Akash, his body sinewy from age and the Indian heat. A nerve pulsed in the corner of his downturned lips.

"Uncleji –" said Akash.

The older man's voice erupted in hoarse rage. "You!" He rushed at Akash, planted two hands on his chest, and shoved him to the ground.

Akash lay in the gutter.

His father-in-law turned to the house to make sure no one had heard the commotion. He swung back round to Akash. "You are the reason she did this! I trusted you with my daughter and you betrayed us. Was one woman not enough for you?"

The fault was Akash's. There could be no question.

"Please." Akash made no attempt to get to his feet. His body coiled as tight as a spring. He wrung his hands together. "I need to know, is she okay?"

"No. It will never be okay." A shadow passed across his father-in-law's face, washing away the sorrow and anger, leaving only coldness. "Jaya is gone."

"Gone?"

*No, please. Please make it right.*

"Gone." He shuddered. "Jaya is dead. You're no longer welcome here. We want nothing to do with you. You're not wanted at the funeral. Let us grieve our beautiful daughter." His face crumpled. "Don't come back here, Akash. Next time, I won't be so gentle." He spat and a gloopy ball of spit and tobacco landed millimetres away from Akash's leg. His father-in-law swivelled on his heel, crossed to the threshold of his house, and clicked the door shut without a second glance.

Akash went limp. It seemed to him he had entered a parallel universe. The nightmare could not be his own. His mind swam with images of Jaya: tendrils of her hair curling on the pillow as he'd left to meet Soraya that morning; her distress in the rose garden as realisation of his affair dawned; Jaya lighting a match robotically, as if her own life were an after-thought; the swirling flames. Her father's cold voice pronouncing, "*Jaya is dead.*"

It was all so clear now. Awareness of his own selfishness hit him like a boomerang. *I did not cherish her. I did not save her.* There was no escaping who had lit the match that killed Jaya. His

shame and guilt extended and twisted until it morphed into a monster he was unable to contain. Ice wrapped itself around his heart, protecting him from pain.

His logic warped. He could not go home. The thought of it made him physically sick. Instead, he wandered through dusty streets, aimless, empty-handed. Somewhere along the route, he lost his bag. He had no papers. No wallet. His teaching certificate, sponsored by parents, disintegrated on the wind. He couldn't face the gossip about Jaya that would inevitably poison every friendship. He had earned those black stains, he had driven her to death, but he was too much of a coward to face them. There would be some, too, who would lay the blame entirely at Jaya's feet. Akash could not stomach that, either. *Why didn't I save you?* He felt more protective of her in death than he had in life. Already he wished, more than anything, that she would rise from the ashes like a phoenix, unharmed and willing to start their marriage anew.

He craved a blank sheet, a new beginning, for his soul to be washed clean. *What have I thrown away?* Maybe they could have loved one other, had he given Jaya a chance. He had rebelled against the marriage as if he were a teenager, not a grown man. Now, she was a charred body waiting to be dust. How could he live with himself?

He approached a disused railway bridge. It provided shelter from the fast-cooling night. The inky night, unlit by stars, bled into the underside of the bridge and seeped into his skin. Akash sought out a pocket of light provided by a lonely street lamp and leant against the curved stone wall. His teeth chattered from the chill or exhaustion. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his trousers. His fingers touched the gold wedding band he had removed that morning en route to meet Soraya in the rose garden. The ring had cooled without skin contact. A sob caught in Akash's throat as he replaced it on his finger. He twirled it round and round, mirroring the motion of the firestorm in his mind.

A man loomed out of the darkness and lurched towards him. An almost empty bottle clanked in his hand. Akash drew back as the man collapsed next to him, but not before a strong smell of gin washed over him.

"You look like your best friend died," said the man.

Akash gave him a blank stare, only half registering the words.

"Oh shit, bad day, man? Here, have some of this." He offered the alcohol to Akash and flashed a comforting smile, showing his stained teeth and a gap where his lateral incisor should have been. "You looking at this?" He pointed to the gap with a grimy fingernail. "You'd think I lost it out here." He threw back his head and laughed. "But, no, I was playing cricket with my brother, must've been about eleven. I took a googly in the mouth. You should've seen the blood. I was lucky it was only the one. My mother cried but I liked the fuss. She let me eat kulfi for weeks while the gum healed."

Akash considered the man. They were of a similar age, although neglect had shrivelled the other man's body. Skin and bones remained, and his back curved like a wave. Akash took the bottle from the man's extended hand, not wanting to offend and needing to drink. He put the bottle to his lips, draining the remnants. The alcohol burned his throat. He lifted his arm to toss the bottle aside, but the man laid a hand on his arm.

"Best not to shit where you sleep, know what I mean?"

Akash found his voice. "Sorry."

"No harm done. I'm Tariq." He swept his hand through the air, indicating the half-moon concrete tunnel. "This is my sometimes home. I say sometimes, because I have to fight to keep it. Sometimes I win; sometimes I lose. If I lose, I make sure I live to fight another day. It's a good place." Gratitude shone from his face. He pointed above them. "Not much rain gets through. Unless it's monsoon, and then that's a bit touch and go." He clambered to his feet as though it

cost him great effort. "I like you, man. Not often I have a conversation partner. You can stay awhile if you want."

The emotions of the day weighed on Akash like a rock on an insect. *I killed my wife*, he thought over and over. He needed a brief respite. Besides, he had nowhere else to turn. He looked deeper into the darkness and made out a blanket and a saucepan.

He felt lighter knowing no one would look for him here. "That's kind of you," he said. "I'd like that. You know, just to catch my breath."

Tariq bowed low before him, a solemn expression on his face. "Follow me. I'll show you around."

## Chapter 4

During Jaya's convalescence, her mother visited for an hour most mornings. She sat and patted her daughter's hand, tutting underneath her breath. Her mother meant her to know Jaya had caused this; she was responsible for her own downfall, and as such the sympathy she received was by the grace of her mother's superior morality, not something she deserved. Those hours trapped in bed, pretending to appreciate her mother's efforts, widened the already existing divide between the women.

On Wednesdays, like clockwork, always at 4 o'clock, after her weekly laughing yoga meeting with the ladies from the temple, her mother stayed for a longer visit. She maintained the club lifted her spirits even in the direst circumstances.

Jaya had accompanied her once, and it struck her as surreal that women who gossiped about one another in everyday life could face each other in a circle and force laughter.

"Hahahahahaha."

She joined in with her hand on her belly. *I feel ridiculous.*

"Hahahahahaha."

*Oh, this eye contact is awkward. What is that one man doing here?*

"Hahahahahaha."

*No, this is not for me. Maa looks like she is really enjoying herself. Will she notice if I leave?*

After the fire, her mother insisted she needed the laughing club more than ever. Jaya had brought shame on the family. She had driven her husband away. The guilt hung in the air between mother and daughter like an executioner's axe. As the weekly laughing yoga session ended and the women stood about nattering, she could just picture her mother holding court like a great lady, careful to keep her worry a secret from her friends lest Jaya's situation colour the family reputation any further.

Despite her disappointment, Jaya's mother did her duty as a woman. She brought fresh *chapatis*, taken from the pile she made for her husband each morning, together with leftovers from the night before. This time when Jaya peeked inside the bowl, she found fried okra and tiny potatoes swimming in ghee.

"Thanks, Maa. It's nice to have a break from the hospital food."

Her mother sniffed. "You know I like feeding you all. Your grandmother taught me well."

Jaya nodded. Her mother and she were rooted in different generations, but she had been brought up to believe that a woman's duty was to care for and nurture others, to be obedient and selfless, to teach those values to future generations.

"You still haven't told me why you did it," said her mother.

"You know why," said Jaya, overwhelmed by weariness.

The questions pained her. Her father may have chosen not to openly challenge Jaya's portrayal of events the day of the fire, but her mother just knew. She knew the way a mother would know if her child was up to no good even if they were not in the same room. She knew because if a mother chose to see the truth, there could be no artifice. Even if the words spelled out one reason, her mother's radar could sense a slight rise of the voice, a hesitation that rendered all lies useless.

"Aah Jaya, I don't know anything," said her mother, exasperated. "Only that Akash hurt you, as men have always hurt women. It is nothing new."

"It was to me." The double standards stung. Why had Akash not been obedient and true if it was expected of her?

She wanted to be alone. Her skin ached and itched as it knitted together. It made her irritable and angry, despite the painkillers. One day she wanted to move, the next she wanted to give up. The nurses tried to keep her comfortable. They changed her pressure bandages daily. Bathing helped to soothe the discomfort for a short while, but always, the itchiness returned, and the indignity remained a constant presence.

She wanted to go home, but she didn't know where home was. Home had been the house she shared with Akash. Her childhood home was not a sanctuary. The fire had happened there. It underlined her new status: that of a deserted wife.

"What was your intention, Jaya? Did you want to die or was it a protest?"

Silence.

"Did you want Akash to feel guilty for his affair? I told you men will be men!" Her eyes narrowed. "Or was it us you wanted to punish? What, you think we chose the wrong man? Oh, the arrogance of youth." She flung up her hands.

Jaya's vision blurred with tears. She couldn't fight herself as well as her mother. She picked out a spot on the pale hospital wall and willed herself to be stronger.

"Why didn't you listen to me? You can't fight tradition. Women like us just don't."

"Then who else, Maa? Wait, you wanted me to roll over, just continue the charade." Bitterness reached out, unchecked and violent, like a physical blow.

"Did you really expect to change anything? All you have done is bring shame on us. Your husband is gone. Has he visited you here? How are we expected to afford the bills, Jaya?"

Though Jaya's treatment had taken place in a government hospital, her burns required expensive specialist treatment. Guilt had become an ever-present companion. Her parents struggled financially. Her studies had been a last parental investment before they had washed their hands of her, and passed the responsibility over to her husband as if she were livestock, not a thinking person with her own hopes and dreams.

Try as she might to shake off the chains of reality, her present was as clear to her as the scars on her body. She could not bear the toxic mix of anger, shame and financial worry that poisoned what love remained in her life. The thought of her parents not having enough money clawed at her, and it was only amplified by her mother's visits.

"I'm sorry," said Jaya. "We can use my university fees." Her world grew smaller still.

"Yes, we may have to. But know this, Jaya. Your Papa and I, we agreed to university for you to improve your life, Jaya. And now look what you have done! And Akash, not even he wants to clean up this mess. You are now our problem to fix." Tears cascaded down her mother's face. "You used to be beautiful. What husband would want a wife such as this?"

Jaya's anger flared. Akash had cheated, not her. She had believed in love, and he taught her the crumbling reality of her idealism. He was free whilst she remained here, trapped. "I am alive, Maa. I am alive. Doesn't that count for anything?"

Her mother glanced up through tears. "Maybe it would have been better if you had died."



Hours turned into days.

Days turned into weeks.

The baths, the dressings, the skin grafts, the pain medication, the physical therapy: it all blurred into a nightmarish cycle. Jaya ignored calls from her friends from university. What good would it do to keep up contact with those who would make her feel worse? Their lives progressed, while hers remained stuck.

Neither did she make friends with the patients that came and went. She cowered at the thought of exposing her vulnerability to strangers, and had no energy to support them through

their own suffering. The only person who pierced through her armour was Ruhi. Still, she worried about the burden she placed on her younger sister, and the recriminations Ruhi would receive from their parents for her unflinching support of Jaya.

She longed to be able to care for herself, to save the embarrassment and cost of medical care. Even basic tasks like washing herself eluded her. She had no inclination to dress up and look beautiful. She no longer felt like a woman, just a thing. She had worn hospital gowns since her admission. It made bathing and changing dressing much easier for the nurses. Independence had become a distant goal. A dream.

When the therapist suggested she try walking, fear overwhelmed Jaya despite her irritation of being pushed around in a wheelchair. Ruhi came to the rescue, a cheerleader even on Jaya's darkest days. Today, she insisted on accompanying Jaya on a short walk through the hospital gardens, and wouldn't take no for an answer.

"You can do this, *yaar*. You just need to start."

So Jaya hobbled along on crutches while Ruhi strode ahead, opening doors, beaming in the sunlight while Jaya grumbled behind her. Her legs were still sore and each movement felt unnatural. The missing toes on her left foot meant that progression was slow and unsteady, as if she were a toddler learning to walk again. A dressing gown covered her body, but her cheeks flushed when she met strangers. Could they see underneath to the monstrosity that was now her body? Her oddly shaped feet poked out from under the gown, sheathed in both socks and slippers to hide them from prying eyes.

Ruhi looked so beautiful fresh from her shower, dressed in a simple *salwar kameez* the colour of ripe limes and smelling of cocoa butter, that Jaya felt grotesque by comparison.

She turned to face her sister. "Why did you save me, Ruhi?"

"Because I love you, even if you don't love yourself."

Jaya's stomach churned.

Akash had watched her burn and not lifted a finger to help her. If only she could forget. She held that knowledge to her as a beggar holds his last copper. She wouldn't betray Akash by telling her family the hideous truth of his cowardice.

"It would have been easier if I had died." She wondered if she would ever know contentment. What was the point of it all if not?

"Who would it be easier for? For you?"

"For us all. Maa wishes I'd died. She said as much. Or perhaps she'd prefer me to wait until I am a widow, and then place myself on the funeral pyre with my husband." Jaya regretted her words as soon as she had said them. Now she had ruined their walk, too.

Ruhi threw up her pretty manicured hands. "Maa doesn't mean it, you know. It's just her way. She loves you."

"She worries about the bills and I don't blame her." Again, the clawing guilt.

"Do you know what I'm interested in? Not Maa, but you. You're clever. You're strong. You were going somewhere. Don't let this stop you."

They stopped by a maple tree, its branches fanning out over them, leaves flame-red and sharp like the fire that haunted her.

Her sister faced Jaya and grasped her arms. "Why did you do it?" she said. Ruhi's breath came in short bursts. She blinked back her tears, molten brown eyes clear over crescent shadows, and it hit Jaya how her act had impacted them all.

Jaya's heart pounded while she searched for the honesty she owed her sister. Her jaw slackened as she released the hold on her control. "Honestly? I don't know why I did it. I was on auto-pilot, not thinking clearly. Or maybe thinking too much. I felt trapped, unloved, and

the fire offered me a release. It breathed. It hated. I felt at one with it." Her words were barely audible above the hissing of the breeze. "I wanted to punish Akash, to make myself into the unlovable creature he sees when he looks at me."

"You wanted to punish him? What did Akash do?" The lack of censure in Ruhi's voice almost became Jaya's undoing.

Her voice sounded alien, even to her own ears. "Didn't Maa tell you? Akash is in love with another woman." A bitter laugh, laden with shame, pierced the tranquillity of the gardens. "Because he lay with her instead of with me. Because however different I am from Maa, I too only have a future when a man determines it. I didn't want to be second best. I wanted to come first."

"He betrayed you?" Ruhi cried in great heaving sobs, and Jaya reached for her, wobbling on the crutch that prevented her from enfolding her sister in her arms. "Why fire, Jaya? Of all things, why choose that? It's so violent."

Jaya hesitated. "Fire. I chose fire because it was there, Ruhi. No other reason. It was the weapon that presented itself."

Ruhi reached for her hand, making a conscious effort to slow her breath. "You are stronger than this, Jaya. I know it. I won't let you give up."

Jaya's crutch clattered to the floor.

"You're my big sister. I need you."

"How could you need me? You are the favourite, now more than ever." She made an effort to smooth the deep trench lines digging into her brow, the ones that undoubtedly revealed her bitterness. Maybe her sister would know how to soothe her, how to make this all go away. Ruhi soared above challenges. She always knew the right thing to say. Jaya could never compete with that, though she loved her sister for it.

"No," said Ruhi. "I am the protected one, because you take the steps first. I learn from your triumphs and your mistakes."

Jaya's muscles tensed until her shoulders became rocks. Her throat ached with the effort of holding back tears. Ruhi deserved a better guide.

"What do you expect me to do?" Jaya's voice rose up the octave in challenge to her sister. "In a society like ours, where girls are measured by beauty, what chance do I have? Will anyone respectable even want to hire me now? A married woman, abandoned by her husband, flunked out of university, with hideous scars and a limp?"

Ruhi sighed. "Have you tried talking to Akash?"

"Have you heard anything I've been saying, Ruhi?" Jaya swung towards her sister in exasperation. "Akash is not coming back, and that, at least, is a blessing. I'm not what he wants. Maa would force me to live with him as man and wife, and I couldn't bear that. I can't imagine his parents taking me back either. Why would they, when their son has abandoned me?" She shrugged, a grown woman lost in the maze of her present. "My bride-wealth was not significant enough for it to be worth their while."

"You will come home. You will get a job, and you will start over," said Ruhi. "I believe in you."

That pressure weighed on Jaya. She saw no way through this forest, even with Ruhi by her side to light the way. "Maa won't like it."

"Leave her to me."



Dr. Tarpana picked up the notes at the end of Jaya's bed and leafed through them. "How are your parents? The nurses mentioned they haven't been visiting as much."

Nothing passed by Dr. Tarpana's attention. Over the past weeks, Jaya had come to respect her. She set aside the sketch pad she used to while away the hours in hospital, and answered with honesty. "Busy keeping up appearances."

"They must be worried about you."

"Yes." She had been a terrible daughter.

Dr. Tarpana sat down in a chair at her bedside despite the hustle and bustle of the ward. "Never forget how fortunate you are."

"Fortunate?"

"If you had been found any later, you would have risked long-term disability."

Jaya grimaced. "Lucky me, it's just scars, missing toes and a limp..."

"Don't underestimate the psychological impact, Jaya. If you would just agree to counselling –"

"I don't need counselling." What she wanted, more than anything, was to be left alone rather than poked and prodded as if she were a specimen in a petri dish.

"Tell me then, what do you need?" said the doctor.

"Independence," said Jaya.

"Is that what you're going to get at home?"

Jaya fidgeted with her pencil. "I don't know where home is anymore."

"Be straight with me, Jaya, and I can help you. Was this really an accident? There's a small community for women not far from here. I can get you a place if you need support."

"How many times do I have to say it?" Jaya examined the tan line on her finger where her wedding ring had once sat. She had discarded it as soon as she had been lucid enough. Ruhi had noticed and fished it out of the fruit bowl when she thought Jaya was asleep. "It was an accident. After all this, you want me to turn my nose up at my parents? How would that look? They are not the bad guys here."

"Then who is?" said the doctor. The calm radiating from her irritated Jaya.

"Please, stay out of it. I'm going back to my family home. It's all arranged."

**---END OF SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW---**