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Crossing the mirage
passing through youth

Crossing the age



BS Murthy

Crossing the Mirage - Passing through Youth

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(Revised edition)

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Dedicated to Kanna,

whom I could help in crossing
the mirage of her mind.

Chapter 1
Shackles on Psyche

Youth is the mirror that tends us to the reality of our looks. The reflections of our visages that insensibly get implanted in our subconscious lend shape to our psyche to define the course of our life.

This is the saga of Chandra's chequered life that mirrors this phenomenon in myriad ways.

As perceived by the deprived, he had a fortunate birth. Yadagiri, his father, was the prominent pearl merchant in Hyderabad - Deccan, the seat of the Nizam's power in undivided India. The patronage of the royals and the nobles alike, helped add gloss to his pearls making him the nawab of the trade. Besides, Princely Pearls, his outlet near the Charminar, was a draw with the rich, out to humor their wives and adorn the mistresses.

When Anasuya, Yadagir's wife, was expecting her second issue, trouble brewed in Telangana, the heart of the Nizam's province. While his subjects' surge to free themselves from his yoke clashed with the Nizam's urge to keep his *gaddi*, Sardar Patel's plans for a pan India was at odds with his designs to retain the Deccan belt as his princely pelf.

'With a go by to the nobility,' Yadagiri tried to envision his future, 'it could be shutters down at the Princely Pearls.'

Thus, at the prospect of the momentous merger, even as the populace got excited, he was unnerved perceiving a slowdown in his trade. Confounding him further, as the impending merger was on the cards, Anasuya's delivery time neared

'Should it be a girl again,' he thought, 'it would be only worse. Why, without a boy, what of the surname?'

Soon, as his wife was moved to the hospital, he was rattled by the prospect of her delivering another daughter. But, as it turned out, his fears proved to be liars on both counts.

Anasuya delivered Chandra, the very day the Nizam, courtesy Sardar, capitulated to the Delhi *sarkar*. And soon, the *nouveau riche*, from the business class, began to outshine the old nobility, pearl for pearl. Buoyed by the bottom line, Yadagiri dreamt of building a pearl empire for his son in the Republic of India. While Anasuya lavished upon Chandra the affection due to a son born after one gave up, Vasavi, his sister, running ten then, found in her brother a soul to dote upon. Thus, toasted by his parents and pampered by his sibling, Chandra had a dream childhood.

But, when he entered adolescence, the realities of life began to confound him to his discomfort. Coaxed by his father to excel at studies, he was perplexed for the lack of

aptitude. What's worse, the antics of his classmates made him hapless -- they marginalized him at playtime, for his lack of reflexes, and, for want of grace, targeted him at fun-time. Well, to cap it all, the snide remarks of the have-nots, that he chose his father well, induced in him a vague sense of inadequacy.

As if all this was not enough for his tender psyche to cope up with, he had to contend with the sternness of the paternal strictness. Thus, it was only time before the seeds of alienation towards his father were sown in his impressionable mind. But the support he got from his sister and the solace he felt in his mother's lap helped soothe his ruffled feelings a little. In time, he reached the threshold of youth, but couldn't cross the despair of adolescence.

Oblivious of the possibilities of life, man goes through his journey of disarray, in the itinerary of the past, chasing the mirages of malady even amidst the sands of hope. And that despairs him forever.

Into his puberty, as his biology induced in him sexual curiosity, owing to his ungainliness, his youthful urge for reciprocity remained unfulfilled. Being naïve to the feminine nuances, his eyes couldn't comprehend the emanations of their indifference. When in dismay, as he turned to the mirror for a clue, the reflections of his self-doubts stared him in his face. Yet, goaded by desire, he ogled women but to no avail. And as he went back to the mirror to reassess his self-worth, the craft of man wouldn't oblige where nature's device deluded him. Thus, being in a limbo, he came to be haunted for being unwanted.

Besides, as his sexual urge got augmented, his eyes became the instruments of dissection of the maiden form. Though bowled over by females, he was unable to interest them himself. Intrigued by their manner, he turned his focus onto those to whom they were drawn. And soon he realized that though the nominators of female admiration varied, the common denominator of male appeal appeared to be the dashing.

As a corollary to his discovery, he shed his inhibitions and psyched himself to make a pass at a fancied lass. But in a reproach, governed by vanity, she said that she doubted his acquaintance with the looking-glass. Sadly, that fatal tease came to shape his outlook about his own looks to his detriment. Disdained thus, he shunned maidens and mirrors alike.

Once when his father reprimanded him for his unkempt hair, he entrusted its upkeep to his sister's care. And as she said, in jest, that his porcupine hair needed tins of oil to be tamed, as a way out he went for a crew cut. Though it was in the fashion then, he invited ridicule of all for the same reason. Belittled thus, he became a recluse.

Perturbed by his proclivities, Anasuya alerted Yadagiri who dismissed it all as the tentativeness of youth, and advocated patience to let it pass. Unconvinced though, Anasuya suborned her female instinct for 'action' to the 'inaction' of her master's wisdom. But, as Chandra began to even lose his appetite, her motherly love could take it no more. Thus, she took her son to the family physician and, on prescription, put him on Liv-52.

As that too failed to enhance her son's appetite, the mother was at a loss, and it showed. However, the women of the neighborhood read it all wrong and gossiped on that count.

"An unwed daughter of twenty-eight," opined a sympathetic soul, "surely is a sore."

"No less an eyesore," said another.

"What can be done," said a fair-skinned, "when the girl is so dark?"

"Don't tell me," said a know-all. "She got her chances but Yadagiri rode the high horse then."

"That's the trouble with us," philosophized a bluestocking. "We aspire for more than we can hope for. Wanting the very best is a bad idea but failing to see what the best one can get is even worse."

Unmindful of the gossip that reached her in its magnified form, Anasuya broached the subject of Chandra's condition with that lady philosopher who professed herself as an amateur psychologist. Having read the brief, the lady of letters diagnosed the malaise as a case of ennui and as for the remedy, she prescribed a course in fiction for him.

It's thus amidst his class books, the Zolas with the Gogols, that Anasuya slipped in, started gracing Chandra's study. Unable as he was to concentrate on his studies, he began browsing through them as a way of distraction only to end up delving deep into the fictional world pictured in them. Soon, as he was seized with novels in their scores, their fictional aberrations helped him analyze his own shortcomings. But what really hooked him to the novel was the ego gratification it afforded him in judging the characters portrayed in it. What's more, the empathy he felt for the fictional figures brought the latent sympathy he had for his sibling to the fore. This, in turn, abetted self-pity in his consciousness.

Well, Vasavi remained single, not by choice. While nature deprived her of a whetting visage, her upbringing failed her in imbibing aplomb. Besides, Yadagiri's attitude towards matchmaking didn't help her cause either. No sooner would a well-meaning proposal come forth than he would dismiss it on the grounds of status or pedigree and/or both. It was as if he came to see his own elevation in slighting others and as the well-wishers too lost patience with him, the leads to the prospective matches got sapped one by one. All this had dented his own efforts besides drying up the well of his daughter's marital prospects.

On the other hand, Vasavi, having failed to induce a suitable boy on her own and with nothing better to do, went on an acquisition spree of diplomas in assorted faculties. Ironically, that made her progress on the marriage front even worse, as the list of eligible bachelors on academic plane was leaner, what with the penchant of the boys to take up jobs with their basic degrees.

When Anasuya saw the folly of it all, she started pestering Yadagiri to see the writing on the wall. Finding there weren't any bachelors of over thirty left on the roll of honor, he swallowed his pride and opened his doors for all comers. However, having gone past her prime by then, Vasavi came a cropper with every proposal that came by. But, at last, fate seemed to test her character by tempting her into wedlock. And steeled by life, she said 'no' to the guy who said 'yes' for he made his mercenary intent too apparent for her liking.

It appears that nature has double standards when it comes to endowing the sexes. Why, it's as if, it affords the females, the charms of youth, only to attract the males to propagate the species. Uncharitably though, so it seems, it dents the female aura on the way to menopause, leaving her to fend for herself mid-course. On the contrary, and for the same purpose, it vests virility with men well past their prime.

Anasuya, however, thought of a detour as she saw that they had reached a dead end. She said that it would be an idea to let a widower lead her daughter to the altar. But Yadagiri would have none of that for he felt it would devalue the family and demoralize their daughter. Thus, the status quo prevailed and Vasavi, to her discomfort, remained single.

By the time she crossed thirty, Chandra crawled into the final year of his B.Com. With her emaciated frame and pimpled face, Vasavi seemed even more pathetic to his sympathetic eyes. The thought that they shared the ugliness, bequeathed by their father in equal measure, made him empathetic towards her, even as he was embittered towards his parent on that very score.

'Oh if only we had taken after our mother!' he thought endlessly. 'Why, we would've inherited her beauty, wouldn't we have?'

For its very possibility, the thought of deprivation made it all the worse for him. But, in time, the realization that ugliness was a worse curse for women than men, evoked sympathy for the weaker sex in his empathic soul.

Whenever he found himself in his sister's presence, the pity he nursed for her insensibly surfaced in his eyes. The first time she was struck by his manner, finding his stare scaring, she gazed at him to gauge his mind. As their eyes scanned the bounds of mutual sympathy, at length, their souls got bonded in eternal empathy. In their state of fellow-feeling, fearing that speech might impair the purity of their emotion, they preferred to keep mum.

'How wretched it must be for her, in her condition!' he thought then. 'Hasn't she reached the dead end, in the midst of her life? Maybe, a career would've provided some distraction for her. But dad would have none of that. It's as if, the very idea scandalizes him. It is really stupid of him to stick on to the old times!'

Often, as he felt his own life was no less oppressive, he became melancholic to his mother's worry. Whenever she tried to probe his mind, he put it in the wraps, lest its exposure should burden her even more. Despite finding him dismissive of her inquiries, she never ceased pestering him but to no avail. Thus feeling helpless, she kept an eagle eye on him, and whenever she found him depressed, which was often, she sent him on some errand. She had reasoned that an outing, if it did not alleviate his melancholy, would at the least help unstring him a little.

That day, as Chandra was confined to his room for too long, Anasuya went up to him in concern.

"What's wrong?" she said feeling his forehead.

As their eyes met, he savored her affection.

"What a beautiful mother!" he thought. "What a pity she bore us ugly."

Seeing his condition, she sent him on an errand to the Princely Pearls. When he was leaving home, he found his sister playing with the kids of the neighborhood.

'How she loves children!' he thought with mixed feelings. 'Won't she be distressed for not having one of her own? Is it as an escape from boredom that she gathers them? But would that help her in any way! Maybe, it could be even worse for her. Why, wouldn't the charm of their company sharpen her lacking even more? Isn't all this misery because she is ugly? What an angelic soul, with life so sour! Oh, ugliness is the worst of fates, so it seems.'

While he crossed the Lal Darwaza, he happened to come across two burka-clad women.

'What's this Muslim custom of wrapping up woman in burkas!' he wondered. 'What is it that is sought to be hidden behind the veil? Is it beauty or ugliness? Whatever, the veil seems to be an ingenious leveler of the inequities of genes, at least in the public view! But, on that score, do women really care to hide themselves behind their veils? After all, it can't be, moreover, how can they be mad to endure the ordeal of breathing

and the discomfort of constraint in that? Then, of what avail is it to women than to cater to the male sense of insecurity about them? Oh, how man's falsity of purpose deprives women the joys of being her free selves? Won't the burka symbolize the hold of man over woman's body and soul, not to speak of her psyche? Well, the slaves were better off than these women in their veils, why doubt that.'

As he went along, feeling sad about that, he found two *hamalis* toiling to push a cartload of cloth bundles.

'Why, men like these too have no way to lighten the burden of their birth,' he thought, looking at them. 'To be born poor and ugly is a double jeopardy really. Oh, how the color of the skin came to be the measure of the looks! Well, it could be that the white man owes his dominance of the world more to his fair skin than the grey matter of his brain.'

Inexplicably, he was seized by an impulse to follow the travails of the *hamalis*. So, unmindful of the surrounding traffic, he kept course with the cart. As if to shorten their arduous course, the laborers exerted themselves to accelerate their motion. Lost to them, he came in the way of a speeding car.

Bringing the vehicle to a screeching halt, the woman at the wheel yelled at him in her sarcastic tone, "Hi, you find life burdensome?"

Muttering an apology, as he moved away in confusion, she sped past him in irritation. The poignancy of her insensitivity perturbed him as he lumbered along to the dismal destination.

'Won't it seem the color of the skin is the measure of man's worth as well?' he thought in humiliation. 'Oh, how dark skin devalues man in more ways than one. Would I ever be able to induce a decent dame to become my wife? Why, even Vasavi refused to entertain ungainly men, didn't she? How come, even the ugly seek beauty in their mates? Why not, it's the beauty that triggers the biological impulse.'

At that, inadvertently, his thoughts turned to his mother.

'What should have been her compulsions to marry my father?' he thought. 'Being so beautiful she herself that is! If only she married another, perhaps, Vasavi and I could've been differently made, wouldn't we have been? Won't mother be thinking that way, seeing the plight of her children more so her daughter that is?'

But, on second thoughts, he felt ashamed that he allowed himself to think in those terms.

'The reality of life is unmistakable, isn't it?' he felt dejectedly. 'It's the fact of heredity that shapes one's looks for good or for bad. Unfortunately for us, we took after our father. Had we acquired our mother's features, and even a shade of her complexion, it would've been all too different. Vasavi would have been a mother many times over by now and I could have been the playboy of the college. Wouldn't that have made all those who snub me envious of me?'

The envisaged envy of others in his fantasy made him envious of them in reality.

'Surely, it could be a heady feeling to be admired by women,' he thought. 'How wanted that might make one feel! Won't the glow of the favored shows it could be infinitely fulfilling. But looks like, it's my fate to encounter indifference indefinitely. What a wretched life, I can't even dare to daydream!'

In that state of depression, when he saw his father at the Princely Pearls, his state of mind ensured that he found him more oppressive than ever. The grouse he nursed that

it was his father's genes that were the source of his and his sibling's troubles came to the fore as though to settle scores with his hapless parent.

The psychic mix of hostility towards his father and empathy for his sister catalyzed by self-pity made Yadagiri's welcome words seem absurd to Chandra's pixilated mind. What was worse, the father's show of affection appeared apologetic to his son's afflicted mind. Unfortunately thus, in the son's myopic vision, the paternal love seemed an embodiment of parental guilt. It was as if at that very moment the son's alienation from his father reached a point of no return.

Chapter 2

End of the Tether

When Chandra had graduated in commerce, Yadagiri wanted him to join him at the Princely Pearls. Though Chandra knew it was coming, yet he felt like it was a bolt from the blue. Having come to mirror his misfortunes in his father's visage, the prospect of the paternal proximity in perpetuity sickened him.

'But how can I possibly object to something that's obvious, natural even!' thought Chandra, and the more he thought about it, all the more he wanted to avoid being drafted into the family business. 'Come what may, I won't have any of it, that's all,' he resolved in the end.

So he began to stall the issue on one pretext or the other, all the while weighing his options, and Yadagiri, who envisioned grandiose plans for the Princely Pearls with Chandra in the saddle, was not amused by his prevarication. The inexplicable conduct of his pride-of-the-future perplexed the father in the beginning only to vex him in time. Chandra, for his part, could not conjure up a credible escape route though he thought long and hard about it. But, in the end, having come to know of an obscure management institute, he tried to sell the idea of MBA to his father through Anasuya's good offices.

"I've more business tricks up my sleeve than the market feel of all the MBAs put together," said Yadagiri dismissively. "They are but snobs in the tweed suits, these MBAs."

With his hope of good hope too ending up in the deep desert, Chandra feigned sickness by way of finding an oasis. Losing his patience at last, Yadagiri forced the issue and fixed the *muhurtham*. Dreading the diktat and determined to avoid the draft, Chandra became pensive. But, slowly, pondering over his predicament, brought about by his parent, he felt outraged. The perceived dominance of his father, and his own inability to resist him, made him hate his parent and pity himself in the same vein. His sense of inadequacy to oppose his father overtly made him think of revolting against him covertly.

'What if I run away!' spurred on by the stray thought, he felt. 'Won't I be free then? Am I not qualified, after all? Can't I live on my own?'

Plagued by the fear of the unknown and pricked by what was known---apprentice on sufferance---he thought he was caught between the devil and the deep sea. Compounding his misery was the thought of the effect his desertion would have on his hapless mother. Thus, he felt as though he was a bird caged at birth, not acquainted with the faculty of flying.

'What's the way out?' he racked his brain. 'Why not tell mom and seek her support?'

But on second thoughts, he became doubtful about the wisdom of it all. 'She would sympathize with me only to plead that I fall in line,' he figured it out. 'What's worse, she

may even extract a promise from me never to desert her. Moreover, what if she blurts out, it would only make matters worse.'

Puzzled by the predicament, his mind played snakes-and-ladders with his resolve--- even as his enthusiasm for freedom surged him to the threshold of action, the fear of the fallout pulled him back to square one. Unable to take the plunge and yet detesting the status quo, he decided to approach his sister for a solution.

'Being in the same boat,' he sought to pump himself up, 'won't she appreciate my lot? Besides, she won't let me down even if she doesn't help.'

When Chandra revealed, Vasavi was raveled.

'It's okay for women to feel helpless in this man's world,' she contemplated, 'and advantaged that they are, it ought to be different for men, isn't it? But, it doesn't seem to be so with my poor brother. Oh, how miserable he looks! Is he afraid of the devil when there is none? Still, if pushed to the wall, wouldn't he be further embittered? Isn't one hapless soul in the house enough to hurt the family health?'

She couldn't help but smile wryly.

'What about poor mother?' her thoughts continued in the same vein. 'As it is, she's worried to death on my account. If something goes wrong with him as well, her cup of misery would be overflowing indeed. Why, she wouldn't be able to take it at all.'

Unable to bear her silence, Chandra clutched at her hand nervously.

"Help me," he pleaded. "I'm sure you can."

"Let me think it over," she sounded hopeful. "You better go now."

As he left, she began thinking about the plight of their lives aggravated by his predicament.

'At least he has me to turn to for help,' she felt melancholically. 'What about me? I can cry over mother's shoulder and she is sure to wipe out all my tears. Likewise, she would lend her shoulder to him as well. But can she address our worries? How she can, isn't the poor thing half-dead on my account. Well, should he desert us now, she would be shattered and may even become insane. All the same, she would never let him go if she ever gets wind of his mind. That's the problem. But what's the solution?'

'Much of his misery may be imaginary,' she began thinking after a pause, 'but its effect appears real. He's really psyched out. Or so it appears. Maybe, it is better that he goes. Being away for a while may relax his nerves and help him clear his mental blocks. There's no other way over there. Dad is bound to be upset about it all. He may even lose his bearings and disown him forever. It would be a tough ask to assuage father and console mother once he's gone. But the family good lies in his going, so it seems.'

At that, she mapped out a strategy for her brother's deliverance but became doubtful about its fallout. 'Won't they be cross with me for abetting his desertion!' she thought in the end. 'And will that help him in the end after all? What possibly could go wrong with him? Oh, life seems to be partial to the males. Won't it come up with escape routes even when fate corners them? Women, oh, they seem to be forever trapped in the man's world, in every way that is. At least some occupation would've served my cause. It might have proved to be an opportunity even. Who knows, I could've met my man at work to work out the rest. Thanks to father's dogmas, I'm condemned to this vegetable existence. How tiresome life has become for so long now! Those silly old values that make vassals out of women! With its oppressive social lock well in place, it's but a calibrated culture trap to entrap women. There is no breaking the shackles my

father and fate together had put my life in. But Chandra could be a free soul soon. That's the advantage of being born a male.'

As the euphoria of her role in his brother's escape gave her ideas about her own deliverance, she became ecstatic. 'Why not go along with him?' she deliberated at length. 'Maybe, single women are vulnerable if they are on their own. There is no mistaking about that in our society, at least as of now. But with Chandra around, it would be different; there won't be a problem that way. Once I feel secure, the rest should be easy to get a footing. We both can work hard and breathe easy. Can't we? We can, that's for sure. Who knows, I may find my man at last to lead a meaningful life.'

The possibility excited her in the beginning only to dampen her at the end.

'Well, it is one thing for a boy to run away from home and another for a girl to do the same,' she thought dejectedly. 'My rebellion could be labeled loose character and my adventure might be dubbed as elopement. Won't all that shame my parents, and who knows, they may even commit suicide! Oh, how can I bring infamy to my family and ruin my parents in the process? If it comes to that, it's better that I die. It looks as if death is the only escape for me from this life denied.'

In the melancholy of that thought-wave, she found herself in tears, but as her brother came back to her in apprehension, she wiped them away in dejection.

"I'm sorry I've upset you," he was upset himself.

"It's the accident of being born a girl that is upsetting," she said as a fresh bout of tears gushed out of her eyes.

Seeing Chandra perturbed, she patted him for equanimity.

"I'm sorry for both of us," he said, himself in tears.

"It's no use your living in misery here," she said thoughtfully. "I will help you break free."

"What if they turn sour with you?"

"Don't worry," she said resignedly, "I'll find my own release."

"Thanks to you," he said clasping her hand, "I don't feel helpless anymore. And I owe it to you forever."

"I know life wouldn't be the same for you," she patted his head, "and try to be brave always."

Chapter 3

Burden of Freedom

Aboard the Bombay Express, Chandra was impatient for the train to move out of Nampally Station. Sitting by the window, he downed the shutter to escape attention of the passers-by. Doubling his precaution to avoid detection, he covered his flanks as well with the centre spread of the day's *Deccan Chronicle*. Thus, in his quarantine, he failed to notice the arrival into the compartment of a bulky youth with a big suitcase.

Panting for a while, the stranger surveyed the scene within, as one would, to gain a vantage seat. Zeroing on the space aside Chandra's, he began pushing his baggage beneath the seat during which he had inadvertently hurt Chandra's feet. When Chandra reflexively lowered the newspaper, it got punctured as the newcomer got up to apologize. Having sat in embarrassment, yet feeling suffocated, the lad reached for the latch of the shutter over Chandra's head. Lifting the same without bringing to bear his weight on Chandra, the fellow settled in his seat to the latter's chagrin.

Though Chandra stared at him in irritation, the fellow who had by then regained his lost ground ignored him altogether. Experiencing a peculiar sense of satisfaction at the chap's recuperation, Chandra, as though to buttress his own self-worth, patted him heartily. When the driver, as a prelude to the guard's green signal, tooted the horn, Chandra's spirits soared sky-high.

Soon, the Bombay Express set on its routine course that charted Chandra's unchartered sojourn in the metropolis. When the express train left the platform behind and went into the open, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply as if to signify his own break with the past. As the train picked up speed, even as the gushing winds dispelled his anxieties, the rollicking motion massaged his exhaustion. In time, resting his head on the window frame, Chandra sank into a deep sleep that even the *chaai garam* din of the tea vendors failed to impact him.

By then, everyone in the compartment had settled down as well. While the woman by the window side opposite to Chandra was knitting a sweater for the baby girl in her lap, her husband amused himself with the playful child. While the burly youth was leafing through the *Film Fare*, the lad seated next seemed to savor the pictures of the fair sex therein. Making the quorum, three middle-aged men, all uniformly bald, were mimicking their boss without any fear of being eavesdropped.

Right across the aisle, an eager couple joined their split seats in a bid to come closer to each other. The tentativeness of the man's advances and the coyness of the woman's responses indicated that they were just married. It seemed the radiance on his face stemmed from a sense of possessing her and the aura she developed was owing to the consciousness of his attentions.

When Chandra woke up, his eyes scanned the surroundings, before they rested on the couple lost in their sweet nothings. Struck by their mirth, he even felt mystified. The infectiousness of happiness is such that in the proximity of the fulfilled, the sense of dejection in the suffering would seem to evaporate. Looking at them with amusement, he envisaged the euphoria newness brings to a person's love life and wondered whether the same couple would be half as eager towards each other after a couple of years. Maybe, later on, it could be their vested interests aided by habit and abetted by hope that constrain them to get glued together. That being the reality of marriage, he wondered, how all crave to tie the knot! The thought he was no exception to it also made him see the irony of it all.

As if to show Chandra the reality of life, the babe cried, making him turn to its mother in anticipation. When she pulled her blouse to let the babe suckle, Chandra got a glimpse of her marble breast. Even as the babe firmed up its grip on the daunting nipple, the mother veiled her amplexity with the *pallu*. Nevertheless, the momentary sight of that female form made Chandra reminisce the import of an earlier encounter.

During the summers, he was wont to sleep on the terrace in the open air. That night, as he sauntered there after dinner, what he sighted through the neighbor's window stopped him in his tracks. A young girl in full bloom was undressing herself in front of a full-length mirror. He became breathless when he saw the reflections of her breasts as they were released from the confines of her brassiere. Soon, as he came to view both sides of her delectable frame, he was dumbstruck by the beauty of her nudity. After slipping into her lingerie, though she disappeared from his sight, he held on to his post energized by expectancy. As his legs cried foul in the end, he pulled himself to his bed in disappointment. Even before his hope goaded him back to the post, the light went off in her room as though to end his anxiety. Though the impact of her figure benumbed him for long, the excitement he felt in her imagery lent substance to his self-gratification that night.

'Obviously, she is a guest,' he thought, enamored of her. 'If only she would host my love.'

Waking up early the next day, he became restless to see her and be seen as well. At last, when their eyes met, he found hers opaque though she saw desire in his. Disappointed though, he kept vigil for the rest of the day in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. Frustrated in the end, he waited for the moon to take over.

Much before the sun could oblige him to hand over the night vigil to its celestial cousin, Chandra was on the terrace to sight the moons down the window. When the clock struck seven, to his delight, she appeared in the room. Combing her luxuriant hair, she plaited it with her slender fingers. Then picking up a Turkish towel, she then went out of his sight, leaving him dampened with the thought that she might have gone only to wash her face. When she reappeared with the towel tucked over her breasts, he was expectant all again. As he waited with bated breath, she began applying some talcum on her body, her robust thighs bore the brunt of his darting looks. And when she dropped the towel to powder her breasts, he sighted the hair over her chink. The frontal nudity of the magnificent maiden made him mad with desire for her possession. Oblivious to his voyeurism, she slipped into her lingerie and disappeared from his view. And he, lost to himself, stood rooted.

Though he tried his best to attract her attention from dawn to dusk the next day, she took no note of him. That made him think of giving up on his vigil, but came evening, he found himself on the terrace and awaited her arrival. All the same, while his desire urged him to stay on, his decency counseled him to retreat. Though he felt it was demeaning to pry upon a disinterested dame, yet he reached the coign of vantage to ogle her compelling nudity. As if she got wind of his suffering from his qualms, and to put an end his moral dilemma, she left to her native, the next day. Nevertheless, her thoughts tickled as well as troubled him for long, well before her curvy figure all but became a contour in his memory.

When the *chaai-wala* came along chanting his mantra, Chandra came out of his reverie. Alive to the environs all again, he felt like having some *chaai*, even as the bulky chap ordered for both of them. Sipping from his cup, Chandra saw the woman opposite bring her other breast into play but that made no impact on him. In that lactation, the absence of eroticism was a revelation to him. Then, as the woman cuddled her kid, he sensed the essence of maternity.

'By now mother would know,' he contemplated. 'She would be taken aback and feel cheated for sure. But then, won't Vasavi make her see the reality? And it would all be different with father. He would be hurt and unforgiving too. Why he may even disown me. So be it. I am a free bird and that's what matters to me now.'

When the vendors started distributing dinner *thalis*, the lower berths were converted into dining tables. As the bulky guy found it difficult to arrange himself, Chandra made room for him by squeezing himself.

"Thank you," the guy said heartily.

"It's okay."

"Are you going up to Bombay?"

"Yes," said Chandra and added, "what about you?"

"Wherever we go," said the other in reply, "we, the Bombayites go back to Bombay."

"Maybe that's how everyone feels about his native place," said Chandra, however, feeling that Hyderabad had nothing to offer him.

As they ate in silence, Chandra wondered whether befriending the guy would be of any help. When they finished their meal, Chandra tried to prolong the talk.

"It is shame we haven't introduced ourselves," said Chandra stretching his hand, "I'm Chandra."

"I'm Ashok," said the other, taking Chandra's hand, "Ashok Agrawal."

"What do you do?"

"Day after tomorrow by this time," said Ashok heartily, "I would be well on my way to the US for MS."

"Perhaps, then," said Chandra in smile, "Bombay might lose its hold on you."

"Our garment industry is sure to pull me back," said Ashok. "What about you?"

"My father is into pearls," said Chandra resignedly, "but I don't want to join him."

"How strange," said Ashok as he yawned, "the famed pearls of Hyderabad failed to entice you?"

"Oh, there is more to it," said Chandra a little embarrassed. "Looks like you're sleepy."

"Anyway, we've a lot of talking to do tomorrow."

"Why not take my lower berth?"

"Are you afraid," said Ashok heartily, "the middle one would come down crashing on you?"

"Oh, no," Chandra felt a little embarrassed.

"I'm only joking," said Ashok, "Thank you. Good night."

Ashok soon started snoring on the lower berth but Chandra lay crouched on the middle one. By then, though most have slept, the newly weds were still lost in themselves. Seeing they were immersed in their sweet nothings, Chandra couldn't take his eyes off them.

'They are really made for each other, aren't they?' He began to focus on them. 'Surely she's a rare beauty and he's no less handsome. Why shouldn't they be enamored of each other? And truly they cling to one another, don't they? Seems happiness courts the beautiful couple for its own fulfillment. And for the average looking, marriage could be a matter of going through the motions, couldn't it? Oh, for the ugly, well, it might be wifeless at the worst or an indifferent mate at the best. What a curse it is to lack looks!'

Seeing the bride doing most of the talking, Chandra wondered about the feminine propensity to blabber.

'What a wonder woman is!' he thought at length. 'How they never cease talking! In spite of their limited awareness why are women ever eager to express their opinions? Maybe, it's all hormonal. But then, why should men, for all their exposure, lend women their willing ears? Ever! Is it the sweetness of their tone or the charm of their manner that appeals? But then, why should men submit to horrid wives? How am I to know the mystery that is man-woman chemistry?'

One by one, as the main lights were switched off, the blue ones came to hold their own. In the dimness of the blueness, savoring the bride on the sly, Chandra felt she looked divine. And sensing the opportunity for privacy, the man reconnoitered the adjoining area only to find Chandra hold the solitary post. Getting wind of their heat, Chandra, hoping to voyeur their romance, feigned asleep to snare them into the act.

When he opened his eyes tentatively to espy the ecstasy of their togetherness, he got a mocking stare from the man who seemingly read him well. Ashamed, Chandra desisted from venturing again. Soon enough, his resolve not to open his eyes for the rest of the night, insensibly sent him into a deep sleep.

Chandra woke up in the morning to find Ashok in slumber and their baggage in place. By then, most of the passengers had had their breakfast at the previous stop itself. The babe, still half asleep, was at her mother's breast while its father was immersed in *The Times of India*. However, as the honeymooners were 'as is where is', he wondered whether they had had a wink at all the night.

When he tried to reach the toilet, he found the vestibule swarmed with beggars and other ticket-less lot. However, with the agility of an acrobat, he entered the toilet only to find it dirty. Recoiling, he came out to gain access into the one opposite. And finding it occupied, he waited in irritation.

"Oh, what characters!" he thought nauseatingly. 'Don't know how to shit even!'

With his own urgency increasing, and as the occupant of the other one taking his own time, Chandra thought it fit to do the flushing himself in the unoccupied one.

When he returned after going through his ablutions, Ashok was lowering the middle berth with bleary eyes. Offering him the seat by the window, Chandra called for coffee.

"Oh, shit," Chandra complained, having sipped the lukewarm beverage that the vendor advertised as steaming hot.

"Well, the railway fare could become a farce at times," said Ashok. "Better we gulp it before it gets worse."

As the vendor came to collect the fare, the friends indulged in one-upmanship for footing the bill. In the jostling that followed, the dregs of Chandra's cup fell on Ashok's trousers.

"It's time I washed myself," Ashok pre-empted an apology from Chandra. "Let's treat it as a reminder."

As the friends resumed their tête-à-tête, the topic turned to Chandra's upkeep in Bombay.

"Do you have someone in Bombay?" Ashok said.

"Not anyone remotely related even."

"Where are you planning to put up then?"

"I've no idea whatsoever," said Chandra seizing the opening. "Can you suggest a place for me?"

"Don't worry, I'll show you a way," said Ashok assuredly. "Once you get a foothold, the rest is up to Bombay."

"How can I thank you?" said Chandra clasping Ashok's hand.

Being assured thus, Chandra began to relax.

When the man opposite had finished with *The Times of India*, Ashok borrowed it. As his newfound friend got immersed in the metro news, Chandra began contemplating about him.

'What a helping nature he has,' he thought, looking at Ashok. 'How lucky, I've met him. And doesn't he appear handsome in spite of his bulk! Looks like, it's when we see the soul of a man, only then we discern the man in him. Oh, how even our outlook

changes then towards him! It's as if his inner beauty acquires a bodily charm before our very eyes.'

Struck by his discovery, Chandra saw a ray of hope for himself.

'Am I not getting bogged down with my physicality?' he thought. 'Can one improve his looks anyway? And how silly it is to go to lengths to seem better cosmetically! Why not I strive to excel at something to seem handsome? Then, who knows, I might find a dame who would see me for what I am worth.'

When the train halted at Kalyan, the honeymooners alighted to an overwhelming welcome of their relatives.

'How mystifying is marriage, even to the family!' felt Chandra, seeing the way the couple was fussed about by their folk. 'If only Vasavi got married! Oh, what all we miss for her being still a miss.'

'Has he chickened out after all?' Ashok thought, misreading the change in Chandra's demeanor. 'Why, it's tough venturing out alone into the unknown. It's as if freedom places burden on the soul. But once he gets his moorings in Bombay, he will find life exhilarating. Doesn't it seem he has some inner force? And Rashid would be the right foil for him.'

Chapter 4 **Onto the Turf**

As if to afford Chandra time for reflection at the threshold, the train was held up at Kalyan for long. And to his irritation, Ashok found out it was owing to some technical snag. Thus, the train could reach Dadar only towards the evening. By then, Chandra was physically fatigued and mentally worn out. When the cab they hired halted in a by-lane in Sion, the weary friends uttered a sigh of relief. But as luck would have it, as they went up to Rashid's room, a *Godrej* padlock greeted them. Nevertheless, Ashok thought the key to Rashid's whereabouts would lie in the *addas* that they were wont to frequent. Securing their luggage with the housekeeper, they went in search of Rashid but not finding him anywhere there, Ashok thought better of it.

"It's like we're on a wild goose chase now," said Ashok, characteristically throwing up his arms in the air. "Let's go back and wait for him."

"What if he's out of town?" said Chandra as they sauntered their way back to Rashid's place.

"If so, wouldn't have the housekeeper told us?" said Ashok assuredly. "Don't worry; you won't be left in the lurch."

"Oh, I'm relieved," said Chandra, taking Ashok's hand. "Wonder why I don't feel tired! What's there in Bombay's air?"

"Well, its Vitamin M," said Ashok patting Chandra's back, "and that helps keep mind and body hale and healthy? Boy, Bombay is a goldmine that lets even the poor to exploit it. Wonder if there is another place like this anywhere else."

"Whatever it is," said Chandra, "I think Hyderabad is an over-grown village in comparison."

Not finding Rashid even on their return, they waited for him impatiently. When he didn't turn up even by seven, Ashok felt it was time he left, for his mother might have become anxious by then.

"I'll leave a note for him," said Ashok.. "I'm sure he'll help you, at least for the night."

"I know it's not fair to expect more from you" said Chandra. "But, what if...?"

"Don't worry," said Ashok, "he won't let you down."

"Thank you."

"It's all right," said Ashok penning a missive.

"I won't forget this day all my life," said Chandra taking the note from Ashok.

"Why make much of it," said Ashok holding Chandra's hand.

"If only you are in my shoes," said Chandra, "you would understand what your gesture means to me."

"Thank you," said Ashok warmly, "my mother says good wishes do help. I wish you all the best in Bombay."

"Thank you, I'll never forget you, may God bless you," said Chandra with moist eyes.

"Who knows, we may meet again," said Ashok. "Don't they say it's a small world."

Having waved off Ashok, Chandra resumed his wait for Rashid.

"Wonder how he got that worldly outlook," Chandra thought about Ashok, as he waited for Rashid, 'at such a young age at that! Maybe, it's the upbringing in Bombay. But for him, I would've remained clueless about it all. So far, so good, now it all depends on Rashid.'

When Rashid came, past ten, Chandra was half-dead by then. While Rashid was going through Ashok's missive, Chandra scanned the nuances of his facial features. Reading between the lines of the imagined frown on Rashid's forehead, Chandra felt he failed to impress. Thus, as Rashid extended his hand in the end, Chandra grabbed that, as would the sinking a straw.

"What a coincidence!" said Rashid prognostically, "I rented this place to share it with a friend. But that bugger ditched me and you're here like a bolt from the blue. Now understand how welcome you are."

"Oh, I'm really lucky," said Chandra, with apparent relief.

"Looks like I'm only half-lucky," said Rashid feeling lost.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I was all set to start a petty business here," said Rashid dejectedly. "Now I'm back to square one."

"What a coincidence," exclaimed Chandra. "I've come here just for that."

"Oh, it's capital!"

"I've enough of it for both of us," said Chandra clasping Rashid's hands.

"*Inshah Allah*," said Rashid and insensibly bent on his knees in prayer, and rising, he embraced Chandra thrice over, as if he was out to guard the deal from both the sides.

"So it's on?" said Chandra, as he extricated himself from Rashid's embrace as though to pay obeisance to his face.

When he spread his holdall, Chandra couldn't hold himself any longer. Thanking his stars and recalling Ashok's helping hand, he hit the pillow in relief. But with the exciting turn of events, an overwhelmed Rashid stayed awake for long. Attributing it all to the will of Allah, he, at last, succumbed to the need of nature.

Rashid, as Chandra would learn later, was the progeny of a petty mason in Alleppy. He was the eldest of his father's five children from his *begum*. Of course, his father,

rather habitually, sired four more from the second *biwi*. Barely fourteen, he dropped out of school to lend his earning hand to his *abbu*. That was to make both ends meet for the unwieldy dozen living in the outskirts of the town. Starting as a cleaner in a motel nearby the highway, he climbed the ladder of 'labor of drudgery' with an uncanny ease. Before he turned twenty, he could help his father set up a *dhaba* of their own. But with a couple of his siblings coming to assist his father, he ventured into retailing of assorted goods. Blessed by nature with enterprise and steeled by poverty to persevere, he found his moorings in the nitty-gritty of petty trade.

But then, realizing that his home soil was too limited to nourish his growing plant-of-ambition, two years back, he moved over to Bombay to become someone-in-the-street. Though he came to sniff the commercial scent of the metropolis-of-opportunities, soon enough, the lack of any capital confined him to life's square one. However, he saw that while Bombay's rich ruled the business world from the mansions, the pavements nursed the ambitions of the poor. Well, they tended to help the enterprising to make it good in double quick time.

When he saw his path to riches through the pavement, he prowled the sprawling metropolis to locate a foothold on a business-*layak* one. And in the suburb of Sion, he did discover, what he thought was a vantage point. Soon enough, he made the square his own by selling hosiery by the day and sleeping there by the night. As his perseverance paid off, he soon started to eke out an income enough to sustain his dreams all the while envisioning the horizons to which hosiery might take him.

Sex, realized Rashid, sold in more ways than one, and in lingerie he saw the ladder of his success. Well, but it was the position that fetched a price for the *maal*, be it a sexy stuff or the fleshy kind. And selling lingerie on a pavement amounts to streetwalking for soliciting, and to the same affect, isn't it? Well, it has to be a mall to lend class to the *maal*. But, in Bombay, as he could see, there was a via media in the kiosk, which had an aura of its own to entice the classes when it came to the *phoren maal*. Thinking that he zeroed in on the USP for success, he searched for access to the recess of the charmed wares.

When he broached the topic with Ashok, in whose father's garment factory he once worked as a salesman, the latter thought it was an idea. Ashok contended that the homespun hosiery was devoid of design to impart class to attract the classes. Thanks to the Nehruvian legacy of the socialistic pattern of growth, the society was bred on 'equality of inequality' and the *bazaar* became bereft of quality. All those imposts on imports meant to protect the *swadeshi stuff* gave cause for the callous industrial culture. All this induced mediocrity in the market and that deprived goodies of quality to the doomed citizens of our socialist state. However, in time, as human proclivity tends to gravitate towards the good things of life, market forces opened up smuggled routes to provide the alluring to the affording.

Soon enough, Rashid found the ropes to the supply lines to the designer lingerie. But, to get started, he needed a kiosk on the vaunted pavements near Flora Fountain. At length, his wanting led him to Abdul, the *maalik* of a kiosk at a vantage junction. As Abdul had developed visions of greener pastures in the sands of Arabia, he set his heart on a visa to Mecca. Sensing the opportunity in the making, Rashid laid seize on Abdul's kiosk. What with the deal struck, thanks to his friend's last-minute slip, Rashid got stuck.

Thus for the fortuitous turn Chandra's coming gave his life, Rashid was never tired of recounting how he filled the void to get the business started.

With the change of inventory, what with the zooming sales, the spirits of the desperate duo soared. While the sense of achievement infused confidence in them both, the exposure to the alluring trade helped Chandra cross the threshold of

inhibitions. Besides, the crowd behavior in Bombay helped him as well. It was as if the ethos of the place shaped the mood of its people. In the grow-rich climes of Bombay, it was as if its men and women both wore blinkers for material focus. Thus, with their mind on the moolah, Bombay's maidens seemed to have their eye on their suitors' bank balances. It seemed an irony to him that young girls should turn a blind eye to the proclivities of boys that buttress their sexuality. Oh, how the dames, while denying themselves the small pleasures of life, deprived the males the same of it!

Thus, to his utter relief, Chandra saw there was no premium on the looks that he lacked in the make-believe world of Bombay. And that enabled him to overcome his obsession about his ugliness. But the pain of rejection that became part of his subconscious came to the fore whenever he delved into his past. Besides, the news from home always put a damper. His sister's letters carried the full load of his father's hurt and his mother's pain for what he had done. Whatever, as he had no heart to go back to them, he preferred to stomach the pain of guilt.

Finding Chandra morose at times, once Rashid proposed a trip to a brothel for release. But, having all along lived on a diet of rejection, Chandra wouldn't envisage the welcome in the red-light. However, as Rashid made him privy to the practices of paid sex, he finally got inclined to venture. Overcoming his self-doubts, in Rashid's company, Chandra headed towards Kamathipura.

"Your wife would adore you," said the girl he had sex with.

"Why so?" asked Chandra tentatively.

"You've the means to madden women," she tapped him meaningfully.

"Thank you," he hugged her, "you're the first to compliment me."

"I bet," she said, winking at him, "I won't be the last."

"I'll cherish your praise all my life."

"I too won't forget your fury in a hurry," she said, squeezing him that made him groan.

As the madam called time, they stepped out of the cubicle in time.

Finding Rashid waiting for him in the lounge, Chandra felt vindicated. On their way back home, however, his self-doubts resurfaced.

'Maybe, it's a ruse to make men come back to her,' he thought. 'Anyway, what a thrill it is having a woman!'

While his sullen sexuality got a booster dose from her, his entrenched sense of rejection spoiled his rejoice. So, as a way out of his dilemma, he opted for a second opinion.

"You're the prescription for woman's nymphomania," said the girl in awe.

As the third one was eloquent too, in time, he came to frequent brothels more for deriving pleasure than to prove his prowess. Thus, while his conviction about his virility gave hope for the future, fate, however, contrived a weird course to chart his time with women.

Chapter 5

Respite by Death

That mid-summer noon, cramped up in a general bogie of that Deccan-bound train, Chandra developed a cold sweat.

'Oh God, what if Rashid's lightning call didn't come through?' he thought anxiously. Well, what else could've I done, as there was hardly any time left to catch the train. How I wanted to talk to her myself though Rashid felt it made sense for me to leave without losing time. Didn't he swear that he would alert my parents to avert the disaster? How am I to know now what came of it later?'

As though to have a clue to the vexatious issue, he pulled out his sister's letter from his shirt pocket, and began to read again.

Oh, my Chand,

I'm sorry, for my decision will upset all of you. But I think I can't help it. I can't carry on any longer, even for the sake of our mother.

Now it's all so clear. It's going to be a solitary confinement for me in the voidness of life, for the rest of my life. I know that it is partly of my own making for I failed to take advantage of my chances and thus missed out on life. Oh, why did I fail to appreciate my own limitations to mess up my life? No denying, though our father wishes me well (and you well) his prejudices played no small part in my downfall. Whatever it is, my life itself had become unrealistic for me.

Let me tell you, I'm just dissipated. I've even lost my ability to hope. Without a past fulfillment for a memory and with no hope to nurse now, I've no appetite for life, which has become torturous to say the least. Moreover, I've even lost patience with myself, well; I'm not old enough to imbibe the philosophy of resignation to be able to carry on in this vein. So I've resolved to put an end to it all, to be merciful to myself even at the risk of causing pain to others. I know time heals; won't it dry your welling eyes and balm your emotional wounds in its own way? And that gives me heart to hurt you all.

I'm glad you've ventured into life to help yourself. It's a great satisfaction that I could contribute to make some difference to your life. As I'm going to become the past, I wish you a fulfilling future. I know there is nothing in my life to inspire you, but there's a lot that can caution you. If you can benefit from that, I shall rejoice from up above in spite of everything.

I would be timing my end so that you can reach in time to shed a tear or two over my body before the need for its disposal is felt by the living.

With sisterly love,

Vasavi.

Even as Chandra finished reading, he was again all in tears.

"You've dropped your ticket," the man opposite said, handing it back to Chandra.

"Thanks," Chandra muttered

"You seem troubled," the man seemed concerned.

Chandra nodded for 'yes' as he found him sympathetic.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, it might take a lifetime to narrate," Chandra said philosophically, "and two to grasp it."

"I hope all ends well," said the other before withdrawing.

"Thank you," said Chandra before wondering within. "Did Rashid's call materialize in

time? Wouldn't she have timed it all wrong to be pulled back from the brink? Won't I take her along with me now? Won't Bombay change her to cheer up?"

As his hopes rose, he felt excited.

However, a little later, as the train stopped in some wilderness, he peered out in irritation. In despair, he tried to visualize the void she would leave in their life if she were dead. When the train stood rooted for long, Chandra became restless all again. Meanwhile, those around the exits stepped down to loosen their limbs. And to ascertain the cause of the hold-up, the curious in the compartments too followed suit.

"It seems there was a derailment," announced someone who gathered the news from the guard.

"Oh, God," sighed a lady in Chandra's compartment, 'then it would take a couple of hours, at the least.'

Hearing her, Chandra was crestfallen as if he was woken up to a new reality.

'Does it portend disaster?' Chandra couldn't help but think in exasperation. 'Oh, how frustrating is this! She could've been really desperate to resort to suicide, wouldn't she?'

'Is it courage or cowardice that drives people to end their lives?' he thought. 'Would have her courage deserted her at the brink? Maybe her cowardice could've pulled her back from the precipice. Well, can cowards commit suicide, as it requires a great deal of courage to end it all, once and for all? Isn't life dear to one and all? If so, doesn't it require courage to die? And courage to die is all too different from that required to carry on living against odds. Well, only those who lack the courage to change their lot and unable to cower in the face of death resort to suicide, so it seems.'

While Chandra was lost in thought, nature ran its routine course. It was sunset by the time he came out of his reverie and the train didn't yet receive the green signal to resume its eastward course. At length though, signaling motion, the driver honked the horn and that was music to Chandra's weary soul. For its part, the power jolted the bogies as though to rid them of their inertia.

Well, as the lethargy on the train gave room to relief in the compartments, after what seemed an eternity, time too was on the move for the stranded passengers. But, fearing that he could be late by a lifetime, Chandra was in distress, and as if to soothe his ruffled spirit, fatigue tended him to sleep in a sedentary position. All that night, as his sleepy head sought their shoulders, the men on either side of him put it into oscillation in irritation. Nevertheless, Chandra was steadfast in keeping his course with slumber.

At dawn, to the welcoming chants of *chaai garam*, the train stopped at an obscure station. By then, the men on either side of him were craving for a cupful or two of the steamy thing. And they, rather rudely, woke him up for the fear of his oscillating head unsettling the tea cups to soil their dresses. Seemingly, their rudeness in no small measure stemmed from their instinct to settle scores for their sore shoulders.

While the aroma of the *chaai* tickled his senses too, Chandra realized that he had eaten nothing since he received the letter the previous day. As if the realization itself had affected him, he suddenly felt giddy. Three hot cups of tea, though, seemed to calm him a little. But, as he returned to reviewing his situation, the exhaustion of his imagination benumbed him. Finally, unable to contemplate, he sat like the Buddha in nirvana for the remainder of the journey.

When, at last, the train reached the Nampally Station, he stepped out into the sweltering heat of the mid-summer noon. Hastening out, as he dumped himself into an

auto rickshaw, he realized he had no luggage on him.

'It's as if time froze the moment I received her letter,' he thought, waiting for the auto to gear up. 'I was lucky to reach VT in the nick of time. But am I in time now?'

Soon the auto driver maneuvered his way out of the surging crowd to head towards Pearl House.

When Chandra sighted his home, he thought about his parents' predicament in case Vasavi had taken the plunge. Meanwhile, having readied the fare, he signaled slowdown as the auto approached the gates. Wanting the auto be stopped at the imposing gates, Chandra thrust some currency in the driver's hand. Jumping out of the auto as Chandra ran towards the gate, the driver hailed to him to take the change. Unmindful of it, Chandra pushed open the iron gates, and finding the main door ajar, he ran into their house.

Coming face to face with, what appeared to be the normal ambiance of their home, he was tempted to feel he came in time, and thus sighed in relief. But, finding none, he felt sapped and sank into a sofa.

'Did it all go wrong then?' he thought. 'Oh, they didn't even lock the house!'

"*Chotebabu*, nice you've come," said the housemaid who came in sobbing, "they are all waiting for you at the OGH."

"How's Vasavi?" he managed to mutter.

'They're trying to save her there,' she said amidst sobs. 'When your friend rang up, we found her unconscious and moved her there. Had he not alerted us, there would have been no chance. God bless him.'

Like a corpse on the move, he accompanied her to the casualty of the Osmania General Hospital, but finding none from the clan there, he made enquiries with a nurse on duty.

"Poor thing," the nurse sounded sympathetic, "she took so much pesticide, enough for a couple of cotton crops."

"Can't she be saved?" asked Chandra impatiently.

"Sadly," said the sister crossing herself, "she's no more."

"Oh, my God!"

Distraught, he reached the mortuary to join his disjointed parents and others, who had gathered there to lament over the happening. On seeing him, his mother became all the more inconsolable.

"See how she hurt herself and us too," she cried, clutching at him for support. 'Now I am condemned to live in guilt all my life. I wish God would take me away too without delay.'

"What an irony!" said Yadagiri, with welled up eyes. "She helped you desert us then and caused your return now."

In the profusion of tears that rolled down Yadagiri's cheeks, Chandra could discern a few that owed their emotion to the return of the prodigal.

"I'm sorry for whatever happened," Chandra mumbled, going up to his father. "I will not hurt you again."

"In a way, it's of my own making," responded Yadagiri with empathy. "Why blame yourself for that?"

Choked with emotion, Chandra couldn't utter a word more.

When the body was brought after the post-mortem, wiping his unceasing tears to clear his vision, Chandra stared at it endearingly before he fell on it unconsciously. And that set his parents shaking with grief and the rest sighing in pity even as the nurses shifted him to the ICU. While Anasuya cried no end, Yadagiri, too shocked to react, sank onto his knees.

However, as it became clear that Chandra was physically exhausted and mentally weary, the doctor declared that there was no cause for worry. While Chandra was being drip-fed for his recovery, it was felt prudent that he be spared the sight of his sister's cremation. Thus, in a way that reflected the reality of life and death, Vasavi's body was ritualistically consigned to the flames even as her brother's was religiously nursed back to normality.

After the obsequies, that custom ordained, the near and dear stayed back to share the Yadagiris' grief.

"Praise be to her," an elderly woman addressed Yadagiri, "the dear one didn't disgrace the family like those who elope in her situation. And to be fair to her soul, you should own up your fault for having been needlessly biased towards every match that was suggested."

"It's no time for fault finding," said Anasuya. "It's her fate that overpowered her life."

"If only she were after you," retorted the old soul, "her fate would've been different."

"That's true," concurred a deserted woman, "fair skins have an unfair edge."

"None seems to realize how hard all this is on Yadagiri," said one, who all along had had a crush on Anasuya. "He must be cursing that his children haven't taken after his wife."

Chandra, who heard it all, felt disturbed.

'What if, like me, my kids too are born ugly?' he thought in distress. 'It's clear that even having a beautiful wife is no guarantee to beget attractive children. Isn't it likely that history may repeat itself to perpetuate ugliness in the family? I better think how to avert the calamity.'

When, came the time to serve the grand meal and with the relatives having left thereafter, pinpricks gave way to melancholy in the household.

Self-destruction seems to be an aberration peculiar to the human condition. Aren't man's miseries of his making, brought about by his own debilities? And yet, while lamenting over his shortcomings, he tends to blame it on life! But life seems to understand man more than he does it. Well, to preclude him from perishing in grief, life infuses in him hope for sustenance. Besides, by imparting an existential ethos in him to avert the cascade of tragedy--of human extinction--life seems to countervail itself to keep up its propagation.

Thus, while fate left the Yadagiris to nurse their psychic wounds, life had provided the balm for their healing.

'What is all my wealth worth when it couldn't provide warmth to my children!' he thought, having read the script that life had shown him. 'As for my status, isn't it all in tatters anyway? What a paradox! My obsession for my children's glory brought me infamy that is besides harming their cause. But, where did it all go wrong? Oh, didn't I try to push them on the track of my biases? Well, all have their latent debilities and imbibed attitudes and it's only fair to let children sort things out as they grow. What

sense does it make for parents to misshape children as their alter egos? What ignorance, couched in affection! It's the possessiveness of the parents that's inimical to the individuality of the children, isn't it?'

'What a fallacy the sense of possessiveness is!' shaken, as much by his personal tragedy as by his reflection, Yadagiri tried to see the paternal role in a fresh light. 'Aren't parents but mere facilitators to perpetuate the species as per nature's designs? It's his ego that makes man imagine that, without him, his family would be orphaned. Is there anything more ironical than the falsity of that proposition! Well, left to her, Vasavi could've managed her life far better. Was it not my bias that had undone her? How despairing it is to think I've ruined her life and driven her to suicide. Now let me spare my son at least. That poor girl was wiser in helping him escape my overbearing influence. But when it came to her own life, she lost her balance! Oh, though late, she helped open my eyes to make it easy for her brother.'

Despite his sorrow, while Yadagiri felt proud of his daughter, in spite of it, Chandra changed his mind towards his father.

'Why was I so cut up with my father?' Chandra reasoned. 'Well, he was born ugly and it's not his fault, was it? Isn't birth itself a chancy proposition? Or is not death for that matter? If we were destined not to be born, wouldn't our mother have been barren? Why blame him when it's our fate to be born ungainly? After all, nature could've as well shaped us after our mother, but it didn't. Imperfection seems to be in the nature of any repetitive phenomenon. Won't some buds of the same bunch blossom better than the others! An odd bud would be crooked as well! When inequity seems to be the order nature had ordained, how fair is it to lay blame on my father? Moreover, being a man, is he not entitled to a wife? Why, am I not craving to take one myself?'

The empathy he felt for his father enabled him to reshape his future. He thus found himself writing to Rashid.

My dear Rashid,

Forgive me for my long silence. I'm sure you would appreciate my position and understand my predicament. Just the same, I know I can't leave matters in a limbo any longer.

The tragedy shattered us all, to say the least. It's inconceivable that I would leave my parents in the near future. Moreover, the bitterness that brought me over there has given way to the feeling of empathy in my suffering soul. So, I've decided to stay back to take care of my mother and assist my father.

Though I know my move would upset you personally, I have no intention to hurt (y)our business. I would like you to treat my share as your own. Do treat it as a measure of goodwill from a friend who got a shelter from you in the hour of his need.

I hope to see you some day as a prosperous businessman.

I remain, indebted,

Yours ever,

Chandra.

P.S: Please find enclosed the notarized document relinquishing my share in our business for your record.

Chapter 6

Lessons of Life

Chandra's tentative forays into the Princely Pearls soon acquired the spirit of apprenticeship. Finding his son grappling with the ropes of marketing, the pleased father began guiding him to hone his technical skills as well. When Chandra began exhibiting his business acumen, Yadagiri took him to the recess of the trade secrets.

Soon, seeing his son on course, the father made way for him to manage the show on his own only spending the evenings at the shop, more to gloat over his prowess than to supervise his progress. And urged by his newborn aptitude and catalyzed by his zeal to excel, Chandra became a businessman possessed. But, what with his own attitude to life having changed, the about-turn in his son's orientation began to bother the father.

"The art of living is an act of balancing," said Yadagiri to Chandra so as to put him on the true course of life. "Nothing upsets life more than a stilted view of it. Was it not my obsession with status that played havoc with your sister's life? Enough is enough, now I won't allow you turn a workaholic. You should explore youth so that you may understand life by middle age."

Chandra was relieved of the post-lunch chores, and soon, he came to temper his work culture on the anvil of his father's fresh philosophy. With the change in attitude to work came the urge to live life to the hilt. What with plenty of time to spare and the money to make use of it, he began to have a go at life, with gusto. Moreover, as by then, the shadows of gloom were far behind him, the urges of youth came to the fore all again; those Kamathipura exploits drove him to the Mehendi.

With his new-found ability to look at life in a detached manner, Chandra began to grasp the vulnerability of the sexes to sexual impulses. What wondered him was that the whores, mollified though by the madams, had enough spirit left in them to exploit their clientele. What amused as well as irritated him was that they sought the extra buck for foreplay as though the deal was only for the final favor! The tendency among some of them to feign orgasm, though he was hardly in, embarrassing though, infused in him pity for them. Vexed with the falsity of paid sex, he ceased seeking gratification in the inane recesses of those crass places.

When he was on the lookout for alternate outlets, a pimp on the prowl accosted him at the Purana Phul.

"Rare housewife, sir, rarely indulges," he whispered into Chandra's inquisitive ears, "very cooperative at that," he winked at him.

And Chandra turned tentative.

"Classy *maal* sir," he said finding "only when her man is on tour, she takes a detour."

"How old is she?"

"Randy thirty," the pimp paused for a calculated effect on his prey, "but Spencer sir."

"How much is that?"

"Hundred sir," said the pimp with a wink, "for each fling."

"Show me then."

"Why forget me," said the pimp in smile, "Well, I know you're in a hurry."

"It's nothing like that," said Chandra embarrassed, "Tell me."

"Not much sir," said the pimp as if to lighten Chandra's burden, "Just twenty bucks."

"Okay."

"Come on sir," he said leading him into a nearby *mohalla*,

Asking Chandra to wait nearby a *paan* shop, the pimp said that he would go and sound her. By the time he returned, finding Chandra impatient, the pimp whispered into his ears that the woman would soon pass them by.

"Why all this fuss?" said Chandra in vexation.

"She seeks the man in man sir,' said the pimp affecting admiration, "and scents his stuff in the street, so to say from a mile. If you catch her eye, you know what I mean sir, you'll have one hell of a time in her bed."

Nauseated as he was with the ways of the whores, Chandra was bowled over by the part-timer's novel way of soliciting. Wondering all the same whether she could reject him on face value, crossing his fingers, he waited in anticipation. And soon the pimp pinched him as a pretty dame neared them.

"How about her sir?" said the pimp in an undertone, "had you ever been with a better one?"

"Well."

"She signaled her 'yes' sir," said the pimp, as she passed them by.

Relieved of his apprehension and whetted by his desire, Chandra's enamored eyes followed her till she turned the bend. Pocketing his twenty bucks, the pimp led Chandra to a nearby street corner and asked him to proceed forthwith to the fourth house on the left.

"You better take me to her," said Chandra having thought better of it.

"Didn't I tell you, it's all discreet with her, as discreet as it could be," said the pimp sounding intolerant. "Why there is no way could every Tom, Dick and Harry knock at her door. Thank your stars that she would be waiting for you, having gone home through the back alley; don't waste time."

As the pimp retracted spiritedly into a by road of that *mohalla*, Chandra put his tentative step forward for the dream rendezvous. But greeted by a padlock on the door, it dawned on him that he was taken for a ride. Oh how frustrated he was, not only on account of his insatiate urge but also at the ease with which he had allowed himself to be fooled.

'What a way to get cheated!' Chandra thought, amused all the same. 'For all I know, she could've been a mere passer-by. How smart of the fellow to have devised this ruse to deceive the unsuspecting! It's all due to the hush-hush ways of the paid sex that one tends to give allowances to secretiveness. If only to eliminate the scope for cheating, given that it is no less a crime, isn't that a reason to legalize prostitution? But then, is not cheating a grassroots phenomenon that makes us a nation of cheats, what with the leaders and the led alike cutting corners?'

'Coming to the paid sex,' he thought as he dragged his feet in disappointment, 'what's the hitch if women opt for sex work when it's okay with men making money on the sly? What's wrong if women choose the calling on their own? Let need or greed be the driving force why should that bother any? Why not let them use their allures to make a living or whatever? Won't licensing sex workers dampen the recruiting agents? What with the availability of the willing for the asking, where would be the need for the pimps to go to lengths to lure the gullible? Won't then flesh trade be conducted on a level playing ground? But, sadly the unscrupulous lure the hapless into it to untold misery and depravity?'

'Well, it won't happen in a hurry in our society,' he sighed for the plight of the women he frequented, 'for we make a hypocritical bunch of a people. What an irony indeed that the very brothel-mongers assume politically correct postures from the pulpits. What to say about the so-called public opinion? Why, isn't it the biases of the masses stemming from their collective ignorance? Worse still, it is the outcome of the cumulative frustration of the deprived who cannot afford what life offers. Don't all men like to have a fling or two with women and where else can they lay their eager hands on women than in brothels? But then, it's either the lack of the means or the fear of the deace that keeps men away from the whores. And it is they who are at their vociferous best when it comes to condemning sex scandals! Oh, how the indignation of hypocrisy comes to shape the policy of the State! Well, that's what politics is about and so God save the whores. And as things won't change in a hurry, it is as well that I'm on my guard meanwhile. But oh, what a woman she is!'

After a rendezvous or two with the alleged housewives, he thought he discerned the difference between the amour for hire and the sex for sale. 'The part-timers enjoy being enjoyed,' he reasoned, 'and the whores neither enjoy nor give joy.'

As if to back his reasoning, his networking led him to Prathima the fascinating.

A fabulous woman in her mid-twenties, she was married to a lout of a clerk albeit the sole heir to a sizeable estate. And as his widowed father-in-law treated her as a daughter, she didn't have any inkling of the marital fate in store for her. But having been reared on a diet of discipline, the death of his father, a couple of years after their marriage, made her husband go wayward. Well, he gave up his job for a permanent place at the gambling table, leaving her high and dry at home.

Well, it was not long before he had lost all, including his aptitude to work. And that forced her to take up a job to make both ends meet for her and her parasitic man. Soon, distressed by the detestable husband, she was distracted by the attentions of her boss to lose her balance.

But it was not long before the peon at the office got wind of the affair pointed out that while the boss was making merry with her allures, she had to bear the brunt of the rough and tough. Why not she let him line up men who would pay for what the boss got it free. And it was up to her to fix the toll for her sex passes that he would be issuing on her behalf. When she protested, he said it was useless pretending to be Sita, having herself crossed the *lakshman rekha* and driving home her vulnerability, he hinted at blackmail in case she failed to fall in line. Lacking the needed moral rectitude to brush him aside, she agreed to go along at last. Besides, she felt that in a way, those escapades might recompense for her exploitation by her man and boss alike. When she took the plunge the fact that she was childless helped her in her abandonment.

Her husband didn't fail to figure out her wayward ways soon enough - not from the wear and tear of her frame but from the bulge of her purse. Though irked by the thought that other men came to enjoy her, he came to see that without them there was no way he could be a parasite on her and in spite of them, he still had all her body for his use. What with her man acquiescing to her frequent outings, she had no qualms to suffer from in her wantonness and that enabled her to bestow her amorous best on men she came to entertain. Since that fetched her better price for her amorous services, ironically, it helped her serve her man's cause even better. And it was at this juncture that Chandra came into her life.

While Prathima found him odd to look at, she was truly fascinated by his prowess at lovemaking. As she turned eager towards him, so he sought her at every turn and that made them feel that both needed each other for their gratification. So, she signed off the peon and came to be tied up to him. Devoid of the distractions, she began to enjoy

his lovemaking even more and soon enough to his delight turned a devil in the bed. Thus, while he found an admiring lover in her, she felt valued by his constancy to her company. As the intimacy of their union made her throw caution to the winds in their coition, it was only time before she missed her periods.

"I'm carrying," she said that evening.

"Congrats, though that would leave me starving," he said, and counting on his fingers added in mock desperation. "Let me see from when to when..."

"You don't seem to get it," she said hesitantly. "You are its father."

"How do you feel about it?" he asked tentatively.

"I would rather abort it."

"After all, you're married," he said in surprise. "What's the problem then? I'll provide for you both for the rest of your life."

"Thank you, but ..."

"What is the hitch?"

"It's risky still."

"What risk?"

"Why, of its exposure."

"I don't get you."

"What if the child is after you," she said sinking into his embrace as though to soothe his hurt from her comment, "given your features, it won't pass, and that's my predicament."

"Oh, I see."

"Don't be upset," she said turning amorous. "No one deserves better to be the father of my child than you, physically and emotionally speaking, that is. If only I'm your wife, it would've been different."

"Well," he said, turning melancholic.

And for once, he failed to respond to her eager advances. That night, as his old doubts, till then overshadowed by his exploits, resurfaced, Chandra went into contemplation.

'Her comment hurts, but how can I fault her for that?' he thought. 'It's not about the abortion; it's her affair, after all. But her reasoning is disconcerting, isn't it? Well, what if, justifying her fears, the child turns out to be ungainly? Though her husband may turn a blind eye, won't that compromise her with others? As she herself said, had she been my wife it would have been a different matter. Why, we met rather late for that, have we not? It won't be long before I take a wife, and what if, as feared, my children were to be born ugly?'

What with that very thought repulsing him, he ceased to think about it. But, as his habit took over, soon he resumed his soliloquy in melancholy.

'Why then it would be the same old story of misery to my progeny and me, not to speak of my wife,' he began to think. 'And burdened, I shall live with guilt for the rest of my life. No, I shan't allow that to happen. No way. What about being unmarried? Well, it's not always that some Prathima would find her way into my life. Why won't I get fed up being single sooner than later like my sister? Well, won't I need a relationship that

only a wife can provide? I need a wife, yes, but children, no. Is it in any way possible that I can have the cake and eat it too?’

And contemplating on this, he racked his brains all night and hit upon a brainwave at length.

‘What if I opt for pre-nuptial vasectomy?’ he thought in relief. ‘Can’t I manage that though the law prohibits it? What can’t be done with money and manipulation in this world?’

As his thoughts turned to his bride-to-be, his conscience was seized by his qualms.

‘Oh, it won’t be fair to her,’ he thought. ‘Any woman would want to be a mother, is it not so? What’s worse, being barren for no fault of hers, she might even feel inadequate all her life. And won’t that make it worse for me morally speaking? And if ever the cat were to be out of the bag, it would be hard on our relationship too. No welcome prospect, either way. That’s not workable anyway, so I’m back to square one. Well, let me think about that when it’s time to cross the bridge.’

The realization that even ingenuity cannot find ways to impact certain facts of life made him morose. Affected as he was, he turned lukewarm to Prathima’s charms, though she warmed up to him by going out of her way in every way. When he finally ceased meeting her altogether, she felt sad for both of them.

‘Can’t I understand his hurt?’ she reasoned. ‘He too should’ve appreciated my situation. Oh, how the best of relationships skate but on thin ice. But was it not a satisfied life with him as long as it lasted? Now let me get on with my life as he would be getting on with his.’

While she had to put her pimp back into circulation for solicitations, Chandra continued to remain embittered. Soon, however, to console himself in solitude, in the evenings, he began frequenting the Public Garden. Even as the ambience of the place brought back the post-Kamathipura equanimity to his harassed soul, wading through the sprawling park to abandon himself to hope became his pastime. However, as though to aid his solitude, he spotted a secluded spot, and in that nook that he began to nurse his hope of his future wife.

But, fed up by her son’s prevarication over the wedding proposals, one day Anasuya threatened to fix one on her own. Then, Chandra could see the writing on the wall and so he ran to his favorite spot as if for cover. There he began applying his mind to arrive at the final solution.

‘What sort of a wife could I possibly get?’ he thought. ‘Given my appearance, it’s hard to get a beauty. And going by my inclinations, some plain woman wouldn’t go well either. What a Gordian knot for my nuptial knot!’

But, when he saw a commonplace character with an uncommonly beautiful woman peep over the shrubs, he felt as though he had a revelation. ‘So, it’s not as if all the pretty women get tied up only with handsome guys,’ he reasoned. ‘It seems the impulses of the heart have to play second fiddle to the realities of life at times. It appears that in the shadow of fate, life makes a conundrum of confusion as well as contradiction.’

‘Were I to land up in a pretty lap, what could possibly come out of it?’ he tried to picture his future as he had seen rays of hope for his married life. ‘Won’t I lap up her beauty greedily? Oh, I would for sure, but what about her? Being laid blaming her fate, she might as well nurse remorse for me, wouldn’t she? Who knows, she might curse herself for having to live with me. But probably, she too would reconcile herself to her destiny and to me as well. It seems that if only a man is lucky to marry a woman of his

liking, nature would mould her to be glued to him. Force of habit and the bondage of offspring would only cement the relationship further. Won't it seem marriage boils down to mere chance?'

As the theory of hope excited him, so the theorem of apprehension pulled him down.

'But in my case, even if chance induces its dice to show up its full face,' he began to think, 'for all that, my vas could still play the spoilsport. Why not I neutralize its potential for mischief before all else? Oh, it's like cheating my vas before it could cheat me! As for my bride, what if she herself is infertile? Who ever knew the proclivities of fate! Isn't it the final solution?'

Shortly thereafter Chandra rested for a week to get over his 'weariness'.

Chapter 7

Naivety of Love

That evening as Chandra ventured into the Public Garden, he found his bearings back in the moorings. When he reached his cherished nook, he spotted a girl seated there, with her back to him and with her head buried in her knees. Though his decency demanded retreat, goaded by her appeal in that posture, he tiptoed up to her. Realizing that she was lost in her thoughts to take note of him, he went nearer to her to gauge her visage but couldn't espy her face as she failed to react to his trespass.

However, from that nearness, as the contours of her waist confirmed her teenage and even as her skin began to merge with the color of the setting sun, he stood rooted ogling at her charming back. But when the sun was all set to envelope her slim frame in his shadow, he lounged on the lawn to escape her attention. As though fearing oblivion, and to register their presence for the last time in the day, the nearby bushes began casting their long shadows on the glistening lawn. And that made Chandra eager to get the full measure of her persona before the darkness devoured the vestiges of the vanishing light.

While she got up in grace, as if compelled by his urge, having come out of his trance, he was awestruck by her face. But as her figure too vied for his attention, he felt ennobled by the embodiment of her poise. When she skimmed her sari at her navel and then like a ballerina, she bent at her knees to let the fall of her sari kiss the ground beneath her feet, he ogled her in disbelief. Unknown to her, as he watched her enthralled, she half raised her heels to tuck it under. Seeing her straighten herself to outstretch the fall over her heels, he felt she might be intending to erase her footprints off the ground she would be treading. As she slipped her lithe feet into her velvet slippers, even as his enamored eyes continued to court the contours of her curves, the languid moon seemed all too eager to have a glimpse of her resplendence.

When she bent to pick up her purse, Chandra's eyes, which had by then grasped the form of her frame, began grappling with the appeal of her seat. When she straightened herself, he got up impulsively, as though to pay obeisance to her angelic self and even though he watched her thereafter, lost to himself, startled by his presence, she stared at him in bewilderment and bowed her head in embarrassment. However, recovering herself readily, she passed by him hurriedly, but crossing the ridge, she turned her head, as though in disbelief. And finding his eyes glued on her, she increased her pace to avoid his stare but soon, sensing that he wasn't following her, she felt easy. But as his thoughts chased her all the same, she became uneasy and hastened to the exit. It was thus into the twilight, she slipped out of Chandra's sight that evening.

'An angel if there is on,' Chandra thought as if he woke up from a dream. 'Oh, what feminine aura she has! And how sexy she looks! Her fulsome seat is so enticing, isn't it?'

What a gait even in shock! Sadly, she is gloomy. It's clear she's perturbed! Why, was she jilted? But would anyone lose such a woman? Well, who knows! What if I woo and win her?'

The impulse that the prospect created propelled him to follow her. But, Nithya, that's her name, reached the gate well before he could step out of that nook. Frantically looking for an auto, she got into the first one she came across. As the vehicle sped past, she recounted her brush with danger in slow motion.

'How did I fail to notice him all along?' she kept wondering. 'What easy prey I was in that secluded spot. Oh, what a lucky escape it was! And isn't he a little odd?'

She was horrified at the prospect of her violation compounded by his ungainly looks.

'Anyway, what have looks got to do with one's nature?' she thought in time as she grappled with her situation. 'Who knows, he could be a decent man.'

Though, she felt relieved thus, she went home still bogged down by her own predicament. But Chandra, who nearly ran up to the gate, not finding her there, cursed himself for his slow response.

Beauty benumbs man before it grips him in passion.

'What a miss,' he thought, as he headed towards his parked Vespa, 'and surely she's a Miss. Why was she so panicky! Did my looks made her scary? Whatever, she overreacted, that's for sure. Who knows what's ailing her? Maybe, she's up against some unwelcome alliance. Oh, if only I could have been a welcome alternative! Yet, I can help her as a friend. But how would she ever know about it? Even if she does, would she care! Will I come to see her again? I must see her again, if only to cement her image in my memory. Won't I cherish her memory all my life though vaguely, so what?'

The masticating thought of Nithya kept Chandra awake long into that night. But, as he set out to fill his marital canvas with her colorful form, sleep cajoled him in her lap. However, as if to have a preview of her picture in the privacy of the night, he woke up before the day broke. And as the longing she induced in him nagged him all day long, by four in the evening, he began keeping vigil at the gates of the Public Garden. But, when it was five, anticipating her imminent arrival and for the fear of embarrassing her, he left for the nearby Gopi Hotel for a cup of coffee. Coming out, he chain-smoked Berkeley before he finally set out to the park in hope. But once in, he went to the nook in premonition and waited in anticipation.

Nithya, having reached the place, shortly thereafter, headed towards the nook, but as the recollection of the previous day's encounter turned her green, she headed to the other end of the park.

Thus, waiting in hope and ending up in vain, Chandra went home dejected. As her beauty haunted him that night as well, rolling in his bed, he had a horrid time.

"What's wrong with you?" Anasuya enquired, seeing his appetite suffer at the breakfast table.

"Don't nag me, mom," he said, forcing a smile.

"Get married then," she said, tapping him affectionately.

"Why, for my wife to take over?" he smiled wearily.

"Won't that sound music to your ears?" she said in jest.

"Let's see."

As Nithya didn't come near the nook that day too, Chandra lost all hope and turned morose.

'Maybe, she won't come again,' he thought in dejection. 'She could've made up with her lover or married at her father's bidding, or whatever. What a miss it was nevertheless. What a rare specimen of a woman! Possibly there could be none like her ever. Had I followed her forthwith, perhaps, I would've stayed her course.'

Looking at the litter of Berkeley butts he threw around, he lit another pensively. But, as his regret turned into remorse, he couldn't stay there any longer. Checking the time with his Favre Leuba, he realized it was five-thirty.

'Why not a movie?' he thought, and headed towards the gate for his Vespa.

'Oh, God,' he thought seeing people trickling in droves, 'how come the vastness of the park turned into a mere nook in my mindset? Well, that's all about habit, isn't it? After all, couldn't she be anywhere here?'

Spurred on by hope, bush by bush, he went about scanning the garden. Tracing her at last, he felt elated though he was weary by then. As he got behind a bush to have a closer look at her, he sensed that she was crying and that agonized him no end.

'If only I could help her,' he felt, as a strange sense of solidarity gripped his soul. And as she struggled to compose herself, he kept staring at her with empathy.

When it was dusk, she got up to go and he avoided her view. Though he shadowed her till the gate, he curbed his instinct to follow her.

'If I loiter around her place,' he thought, 'she's sure to take me for a roadside Romeo. That's not the way to go about it. Let me try and befriend her, and then I can think how to win her over. As she's bound to come again, I shall come up with a suitable gambit. That's the only way to give myself a chance.'

Riding back home on his Vespa, he dreamt of a smooth ride ahead. Yet, he burnt a lot of midnight oil that night planning his moves to checkmate the queen of his heart in the square of his love. When, he thought he conceived the winning move, that only made him even more determined to win her. Next day, after an early lunch, he had a siesta to appear fresh. Donning his best attire, he reached the park in an auto, fearing a ride on the Vespa would make it worse for his hair.

Waiting for her near the entrance, all the while he chain-smoked Berkeley in nervous puffs. At last, sighting her, as he memorized his lines, he tried to steel his resolve as well. But, fumbling at the post, he failed to make the well-rehearsed move. Oblivious to his presence as she passed him by, he stood there benumbed. However, he recovered soon enough, and made bold to pace up to her.

"Excuse me please," he said tentatively.

Turning around reflexively, Nithya looked at him instinctively. And having recognized him readily, she walked away disinterestedly.

"Hear me," he summoned up courage to sound bold, "please!"

Goaded by courtesy, she stopped in her tracks.

"I've something to tell you," he blurted out.

"I'm not interested," she sounded dismissive.

"Please," he said bringing all his anxiety onto his face.

His love had ensured that she was unable to move away. It was as if she was tied by the sincerity of his love.

"I'm sorry," he said in the same vein.

"What for?" she said in spite of herself.

"Am I not the cause of your inconvenience?"

"I don't get you," she said a little puzzled.

"Haven't I driven you from that nook?" he said stretching out his hand in the right direction, as though to avoid a communication gap.

Recalling that incident, Nithya blushed to her roots.

"Please go there," he nearly pleaded. "I'll go elsewhere."

"Thank you but..." she seemed too confused to continue.

"Be assured," he said moving away, "I won't disturb you."

Nithya was hardly in a position to comprehend her situation to react. But, before proceeding, she stared at him in stupefaction. As he turned his head to verify her stance, they made eye contact, and that embarrassed her no end. Noticing the nuance, Chandra followed her body language as she paced towards the cherished spot. Though she had slowed down at the bend, she reached the nook panting, but once within, she slumped on the lawn.

'Oh, how has he been watching me?' she thought intrigued. 'What is he up to? Who is he, by the way? Though he looks plain, he appears well bred. Seems he's not the stalking kind. And isn't he well-meaning and shy as well. Whatever, it's all so embarrassing. Now, that he has played the Good Samaritan, hope he leaves me alone. Haven't I got plenty on hand to bother about?'

Putting the trespasser on the back burner, in despair, she sank into her familiar posture. Elsewhere in that park, Chandra began to take stock of the situation.

'Did I ambush her?' he thought. 'Oh, hadn't her body language betrayed that? Won't that be on her mind though she might not focus on me as such? It boils down to the same, after all. Isn't it a good beginning for befriending? A job well begun is half done. Isn't it?'

Chandra remained daydreaming in the garden till the watchman's whistle called the time.

The next day, as Nithya crossed the gate, she looked around tentatively. Not finding Chandra around, she felt at ease, but as she reached the hedge of the haloed spot, she became uneasy.

'Is he lurking in the corner?' she thought suspiciously. 'Maybe, his gesture could be a ruse to lure me here. How can one be sure when it comes to men out to woo women?'

However, reconnoitering the area and finding it vacant, she entered the arena.

'How wicked of me to attribute motives to an unknown soul,' she felt remorseful. 'But then, how am I to fault myself for doubting human nature after all that? Well, once bitten twice shy, isn't it? But won't he appear naive and considerate even?'

As the kind feelings she experienced for the stranger affected her own embitterment, she found nursing them in myriad ways. And discerning the changes on the skyline the setting sun brought in, she could sense the turnaround of her feelings ushered in by the feeble impulse of his goodwill. And, when it was getting dark, feeling lighter, she pulled herself to go. All the while she walked on the pathway with circumspection though in vague anticipation. But, as she reached the gates, her mood turned into one of despair.

Chandra that day, as though to get an overview of his position, went to the nearby Tank Bund instead. Sitting on a bench facing the Hussainsagar, all evening he was engrossed envisaging Nithya's condition.

'Had we met here, would the tank bund have acted as a bridge between our hearts?' he thought, alluding to the symbolism.

Thus, pleased with the idea itself, he recalled the five-century old romance of Quli Outub Shah and Bhagmathi that had led to the founding of the city. And, he began to daydream, feeling that the coincidence of his idea might portend a good omen. But, by the time it was dusk, he was disturbed by the swelling crowd as well as distracted by the noisy traffic. When he could bear it no longer, he headed home.

'Am I not trying to pull the mountain of love with a thread of hope?' he thought on his way. 'Come to think of it, she hasn't even given me any scope for hoping! After all, it's my idea to induce her to think about me. Well, if I were to win her love, won't occupying her mind be the prelude? Or is it just wishful thinking?'

As doubts about the theories of seduction he'd read about crisscrossed his mind thick and fast, he saw the futility of putting them in practice.

'Oh, how she haunts me,' he thought all over again. 'Let me be content seeing her, at least, to my heart's content. Damn the theories of crystallization of love. I would love to see her, no more of this self-exile for me. How stupid I was to have missed the pleasure of seeing her today in the misplaced hope of possessing her one day.'

Yet, he couldn't desist from reviewing the ways and means to make her his wife. Long into the night, and exasperated at the end, he remained where he began, in the tunnel of confusion.

'Can love ever be prototyped for production?' he wondered. 'Is there any foolproof blueprint for that? The impulse of love seems to have a streak of irrationality in it. If not, how could I have fallen for her knowing that all my love may not be worth a damn for her! Since love is blind, looks like it loses its way for the most part. Won't it seem love is a silly emotion besides being an obsessive sentiment? Oh, where would my obsession for her lead me to? Let me see.'

That night he felt his love was too dear to his soul to be left to his beloved's caprice. Hence, he set out to think about the ways and means of bringing her around to the altar. In the end, he felt he needed to be bold and forthright with her. But as he recalled the fiasco of his dashing move of yore, he was apprehensive about the intended advance. Nevertheless, he decided to proceed for want of a better move and try his luck just the same.

As planned, the next evening he reached the park and headed straight to the spot in anticipation. But, on reaching the hedge, his legs became logs. Nithya, who saw him thus, stood in apprehension. But as the attraction he felt for her propelled him over the hurdle of his hesitation, he lunged into the nook in a fit of emotion.

"I want to tell you," he blurted out.

"So you broke your promise?" she said, a little puzzled.

"I couldn't help from coming," he said in regret tinged with hope, "I came in spite of myself."

"What for?" she responded involuntarily, looking up.

"To live," he said lovingly as his love-filled heart pumped in every ounce of affection he nursed in it into his vocal cords for him to touch the right chord.

"I don't get you," she said, touched as she was by his emotion.

"I'm in love with you," he said, as she lowered her eyes.

She was shocked to hear what she already knew.

"I'm desperate for you," he continued. "I'm dying to make you my wife. I shall cherish you with all my heart, all my life."

She looked at him in bewilderment.

"Believe me," he said.

"What's this!" she said in vexation. "Is it fair to impose yourself like this?"

"I couldn't help it," he continued as if in a trance. "My life depends on your decision."

"Don't be mad."

"I've become insane really," he said in desperation.

Unable to confound her situation, as she left the place in confusion, he sank to his knees in dejection.

'Oh God, why this fate?' he bemoaned. 'Why did I allow myself to demean my love? And scandalize her, whom I love! I've lost my head too. It's unfair of me to have pressured her with my sentiment. What's worse, I've lost my face. It's a shame.'

As though his remorse consumed his soul, he lay like a corpse on the lawn.

Chapter 8

Dilemma of Disclosure

While Chandra lay there snubbed, Nithya walked away in consternation.

'What madness!' she thought in vexation. 'And who is he by the way? Poor chap, he seems to be suffering. But how can I help him? Am I not bellyful with trouble already? I'm more in need of help than anyone I can think of.'

As she walked aimlessly, she insensibly focused her thoughts on Chandra.

'Since he loves me,' the stray thought snowballed into a solution for her problem, 'won't he help me?'

Weighing the pros and cons, she reinvigorated herself and reversed her direction. And as she returned to the nook, she found him lying like a corpse.

"Excuse me," she said sweetly.

"I apologize," he gesticulated even as he sprang up to his feet.

"I know love is no blame," she said with empathy. "But I'm sorry that I can't reciprocate."

"It is my fault really,' he said in reconciliation. "I got carried away."

"If you like," she said invitingly, "we can be friends."

"If only I'm not in love with you," he said with mixed feelings, "I would've grabbed your friendly hand with both hands. Now, I'm afraid I can't be content being just your friend."

"I appreciate your frankness," she said admiring his admission. "What I need now is a friend more than a lover. Good bye."

Seeing her depart in disappointment, he felt dejected.

'How mean I refused to be her friend,' he thought in dejection, 'Of what avail my love if it fails to provide succor to my beloved! Shameful, isn't it? I shall stake everything for her sake.'

And he ran up to her in love.

"Forgive your friend," he said extending his hand.

"Oh, thank you," she said grabbing his hand.

"I'll forever remain your friend in need," he said pressing her hand.

"I need your help," she said lowering her eyes, "right now."

"Tell me then," he said, shaking her hand. "I'll do my best."

"Oh, I'm relieved really," she said as it showed on her face. "But still I need time to think how to talk about that odd errand. Will you please come tomorrow?"

"Same time if you please."

"Let's make it by four," she said.

"Bye," he waved her goodbye.

"Thank you, bye," she said and walked away in relief even as he watched her with love.

'Oh, how he invokes sympathy with his empathy!' Nithya thought on her way back home. 'And he's so agreeable. But how come I was so rude to him? Anyway, I'll make up for that now, won't I? See we haven't even introduced ourselves in that confusion? Unlike Vasu, hope he would be true to his word.'

Chandra, on the other hand, went back to the nook as though to commemorate their reconciliation.

'How nice it feels to be close to her,' he felt ecstatic. 'What a joy it is really. What's that she seeks from me! Weird are the ways of life, aren't they? If not for her predicament, she wouldn't have had a second look at me, leave alone seeking my friendship. Who knows if I could solve her problem, I may even win her affection. After all, won't friendship between man and woman lead to love?'

That night, while Nithya sank into sleep in relief, Chandra hit the pillow daydreaming.

Waking up early the next day, as though to welcome a new dawn in their lives, they both remained tentative thinking about the outcome of their expected meeting. But as the time neared for the rendezvous while Chandra was beset by doubts, Nithya was seized with shame.

'What if she develops second thoughts?' he was haunted by the thought.

'How to tell him?' she racked her brains no end.

Wearied at last, while he left the issue for his fate to decide, unable to hit upon the right presentation, she decided to entrust the matter to her instinct itself. However, in the end, driven by desire, as he reached the nook, he found her in all anticipation.

"Oh, sorry," he said, sitting beside her, "I've kept you waiting."

"You're not late," she said checking with her watch, "but I came early."

'It is funny really,' he thought aloud. 'We're friends without knowing who we are!'

"I'm Nithya."

"I like your name," he said. "I'm Chandra."

"Inspiring name, isn't it?"

"Not so if you go by my namesake who wavers in the skies."

"Then it's wise," she said smiling, "to take your word before he arrives."

"You're a real wit," he said in all admiration.

"Do you lack any?" she returned the compliment.

"Hope to hope."

"Maybe for now, who knows?"

"And for now I'm at your service," he said squatting in all attention.

"I badly need your help as I told you," she said in embarrassment. "But I don't know what to tell and where to begin. And it's a delicate matter too. I am at a loss how to handle it."

"Begin from your adolescence," he suggested. "Though childhood would've a bearing on it, life really starts at that point."

"That's true," she said as though he showed her the way to lead her story. "Besides helping you to get a total picture of me, it would give me time before I come to the point. Here is the embarrassing account of my life."

Chapter 9

Perils of Youth

Nithya matured at nine, a little early, even for the Indian clime. More than the biological change, it was the cultural fuss the happening heralds that made her conscious of her altered persona.

She felt as though the *oni* on her bosom robbed her off her personal freedom. The custom that pulled her out of the child circuit and at the same time denied her admission into the Venus Club, left her clueless about her own identity. Nevertheless, the imperatives of her sensuality and the male proclivities to her sexuality began confounding her. In all that, her sex education was limited to the thumb rules her mother happened to dish out to her.

With the passage of time, as nature perfected the female in her, her frame acquired the womanly graces and her manner imbibed the feminine nuances. However, privy to her own attributes, as her impulses courted curiosity for company; she began to grasp the singularity of her sex appeal from the body language of the enamored males. Soon, her vanity goaded her to explore the nuances of male desire from the emanations of her admirers. Besides, while her compelling looks ensured the adoration of her parents, her application of mind evoked the admiration of her teachers. Thus, pleased with herself, she acquired the poise of a princess.

But, she didn't come across her prince charming, though she was through with her studies. The campus culture that didn't mix the sexes in the college and the parents who forbade dating ensured that. Nevertheless, as she got her degree in humanities, her father went out of his way in search of a suitable match for her. After all, marriages had to be arranged affairs and the dowry was a determining as well as a deterring factor in the real time matchmaking. But as her father was hard up to cough up dowry, Nithya's prospective nuptial was slow in materializing. Just the same, the talk of it that was thick in the air gave wings to her amorous inclinations. However, as the eagerness in her mind and the lethargy on the ground mismatched, the moment of her cherished conjugation remained in the realms of her dreams.

It was at that juncture that her destiny seemed to ordain an apparently agreeable route to the sought-after altar. All those years, her father had put the outhouse on hold lest any man in the garb of a tenant should dabble with the virginity of his desirable daughters. What with the elder three happily married by then, and Nithya, the last one, on the verge of it, the idea to let it out took hold of him all again. And abetted by his wife, who averred that it could be even a solution to Nithya's marriage, if only they took

in the right tenant after proper screening, he tied the 'To Let' board to the gate of their AC Guards' house. Though that brought in the interested in numbers but for want of a hard knock from a bachelor with the right resume, the board began to lose its sheen.

It was into that setting that Vasu entered when Nithya was all alone at home that evening.

"What do you want?" she asked, opening the door to a stunned Vasu.

He directed her questioning look towards the 'To Let' board though without taking his eyes off her.

"My father is not at home," she said, equally enamored of him.

"Can I see the place?" he asked, sensing his opportunity.

"You can, but... ."

"Show me then," he persisted.

"But it's not I who decide."

"I'm sure," he said enticingly, "you can surely put in a word."

She blushed for a reply.

"When can I come back?"

"After my father is back," she said, regaining herself.

"How am I to know that?" he said with a smile. "I'll be back soon."

"Welcome," she said, a little embarrassed, "but I'm sorry."

"Never mind," he said enticingly. "May I know your name?"

"I'm Nithya."

"I'm Vasu," he said smiling, "you've a nice name."

"Thank you," she too smiled.

"Do expect me," he said as he took the road.

Drawn by attraction, she went up to the gate, and he, in anticipation, looked back at her. As that facilitated their eye contact, while she withdrew herself in embarrassment, thinking about the possibilities, he left elated.

'A man for dreams,' felt Nithya trying to relive the moment.

'A dame of a game,' thought Vasu sardonically.

When he came back, while shyness kept her away from him, her desire let her daydream in anticipation. And when he got the nod from her parents, she felt elated.

"He's of our ilk," said her mother meaningfully. "Moreover, he's handsome and holds a decent position. Didn't he say he's an officer at some bank? It's a match that would floor anyone. Isn't that so?"

While the mother placed the cart before the horse, the seed of her daughter's infatuation got embedded in the soil of expectation. And to the delight of all, the following Sunday, Vasu occupied the outhouse.

"What if we invite him for lunch?" proposed her father.

"Why not?" said her mother. "It will make a welcome gesture."

It was at the dining table that Nithya was formally introduced to Vasu.

"Nithya cooks deliciously," said her mother, inviting him to have a go at the preparations. "You can check it for yourself."

"Then," he began eating, mocking greed, "I've got a job on hand."

"In that case," said Nithya getting up in jest, "better I get back to the kitchen."

"Honestly, you're marvelous," he paused, with a morsel in his mouth, "cook, indeed."

"Thank you," she said, serving him some more *sambaar*.

"It's the other way round," he said looking into her eyes.

As he ate with relish, she savored the food that pleased him.

Seeing their bonhomie, her parents too were impressed.

'What a pair they would make,' felt her father.

'Won't he make a loving husband,' thought her mother.

Soon, the parents were delighted that their tenant was doting upon their daughter. But when her mother sensed that her daughter was neck deep in love, she thought it fit to have a word with her. But by then, even as Nithya's enamored heart goaded her on the path of love, Vasu had guided her willy-nilly into the vortex of lust.

"I think it's time his parents are involved," said the mother.

"It's on the cards anyway," said the daughter coyly.

"You better play close to your chest," said the mother. "You know what I mean."

"Oh, don't I know that!" said the daughter dismissively

"Whatever," said the mother, "let me repeat that in male-female interaction, physical proximity is but one step away from sexual togetherness and it's dicey for woman at the threshold of temptation. Man by nature would be eager to press for the final favour and should woman fail to resist, it would be a case of giving away in hurry and repenting at leisure for her."

"I don't see any problem in that mom," said Nithya assuredly.

"But be on your guard dear," said the mother sounding caution.

All the same, the moment of reckoning for Nithya came soon enough to her consternation.

Chapter 10

Absurd Proposal

Though not nonplussed at having lost her virginity, Nithya, nevertheless, began pressuring Vasu for the nuptial. Yet, his assurances to tie the knot made her give him more of her own that was till she felt he was taking it easy. When she began denying him the good time to drive home her point that only made him indignant, she could figure out the consequences of his indifference. Thus, feeling vulnerable, she forced herself to humour him even more furthering his fulfillment all the more. But even as he procrastinated over their nuptial, his seed began to evolve in her womb. When she missed her periods, that made matters worse for her.

When confronted with the development, Vasu could dodge no more, and spilled the beans.

"I understand your embarrassment," he began.

"What an understatement!" she said in consternation.

"We shouldn't have jumped the gun."

"It's neither here nor there," she said, worried over his prevarication.

"Why worry," he said taking her hand, "as I'm around still."

"Better you rush to your parents now," she said as her voice reflected her sense of urgency. "We should get married before my morning sickness shows up."

"Don't I know about that, but...."

"But what?" she interrupted him in alarm.

"Why are you so impatient?"

"Do remember," she said turning apprehensive, "you promised to marry me."

"I'm here to keep my word."

"Then why dilly-dally?"

"Our marriage is not the problem," he said affecting confusion. "The predicament is how to go about it."

"You always sounded confident, didn't you?"

"I am all for marrying you," he said assuming a melancholic pose. "But there are other things in the way. Those that make life what it is."

"What are you trying to convey?" she became nervous.

"I'm too confused for that."

"What confusion?"

"Now I'm trapped between two stools," he said affecting pain. "I can't extricate myself without disturbing either or both. That's my predicament."

"Is it the time to beat around the bush?" she asked in vexation. "Don't you understand my position? Are your parents against our marriage or what?"

"If it were so," he said assuming an air of arrogance, "I would've walked out on them long back and led you to the Registrar's Office straightaway. But my dilemma is different."

"What's that?" she said, perplexed.

"Promise me," he said outstretching his right palm, "you won't take it amiss."

"Oh, tell me," she said brushing his hand aside.

"We've to contend with Prema."

"Who's she?"

"She's my betrothed," he said nonchalantly.

"What!" she exclaimed, unable to believe her ears.

"We were engaged shortly before I met you."

"What do you mean?" she nearly fainted.

"Don't get upset," he said, trying to comfort her, "listen to me fully."

"How could you do this to me?"

"Oh, please listen," he tried to appease her, "I'll explain everything."

"What else can I do now?" she sounded helpless. "After all, haven't I compromised myself?"

"Don't get depressed," he said trying to sound genuine. "I would never swap her for you. I wouldn't do that even with a Helen for sure. Just try to understand my situation."

"I'm confused really."

"Don't be impatient," he said. "We'll sort out things."

"You should've had me," she blurted out, "only after sorting out things."

"Well, I'll explain."

"Does it make any difference to me now?" she said, wearily.

"When I became a probationary officer, Prema was proposed to me," he said, weighing his words as though he was a tutored witness in the court. "It was a dream match, whichever way one may look at it. We got engaged before I came here for the training. How could I have known that you'd come into my life? The moment I saw you, I was lost in love. The day I was sure of your love, I wrote to my father to cancel the engagement."

"What did he say?" she couldn't help enquiring.

"He said it would put him in a spot," he paused as though to let her prepare for the blow to follow. "He said he used the dowry he took to clear the debts. If I go back now, he will be obliged to return the amount and that would push us back into the debt trap all again. What's worse, it would jeopardize our position in the *biradari*. So he pleaded that he be spared all this in his old age. Can't you understand my predicament? I've a balancing act to do now and you can see how hard it is on me as well."

"If anything, it's harder on me, especially with your child in my womb. Its time you realize that," she said spiritedly. "Well, I see a way out. Let's take a loan to return the dowry. I'll take up a job and help you tighten our belts as well. It's only a matter of time before we come out clean."

"I don't think it's not workable," he said sounding sentimental. "Besides making me feel like a drag on your life that would only bring me back to square one. Didn't I tell you I always felt deprived, being born poor? Being a Class One Officer, I still feel insecure. While our tightened belts would only reinforce my deprived feeling, the debt trap could make me feel all the more insecure. Moreover, when the novelty wears off, I may even perceive you as the cause of my discomfiture. What's worse, our marriage itself could be on the rocks due to domestic discords."

"All that could be true," she said, as he felt relieved. "But, what's the alternative?"

"There is one," he said seemingly in hesitation, "if you could take it."

"Tell me."

"That is, he said, 'if you believe that I am yours first and last."

"If not," she said a little relieved, "do you think I would've given myself to you?"

"Prema is stinking rich," he began taking her hand as though to make her a co-conspirator.

"Now I see," she said pulling back in vexation, "why you are ditching me."

"If you think I am marrying her for money," he said seemingly offended, "she is no less a stunner than you."

"Oh, the novelty seems to have worn off already!" she said as sarcastically as she could while trying not to feel helpless. "Why not, haven't you had enough of me already?"

"I'm sorry," he said cajolingly, "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm just explaining things. Believe me, life for me without you would be like going through the motions. But without wealth it comes to the same in spite of you. Had you come into my life straight away, it would've been like living in heaven in your wifely fold. But this turn of events gave me the opportunity of my life that is hard to miss. And hadn't you come into my life, I would've been happy still, living with her, unaware of what fulfillment could really be with a woman. To be or not to be, that's my dilemma."

"Better realize that you can't have the cake and eat it too," she said as she readied herself to force the issue. "You've to take your pick, now and here. Well, as you have made your inclinations apparent, I won't bank upon your love anyway. I can only appeal to your conscience, that too because of my condition. If only I were not carrying, seeing how you are dodging, I would've walked out on you by now. Now I know what a woman loses by compromising herself. Anyway, it's too late in the day for me to think of it."

"I know you're hurt," he said. "As I understand your vexation, you should also realize I too have my qualms. I've been troubled ever since we've got physically close. That very night I thought of running away from you. But your beauty and my love immobilized me."

"Now that you're satiated," she hissed at him venomously, "why don't you admit it's just lust with you."

"Even if you take it that way," he said, "a lifetime of sex with you won't be enough to quench my thirst for you. And the truth is, I'm passionately in love with you. You know I've got addicted to you, thanks to the ardor of your amour. Without you I would go mad indeed."

"Keeping my fate in balance," she said in agony, "you're killing me with your falsity."

"If you go with my proposal," he said as if to tilt the balance, "everything would turn out fine in the end."

"What's that?" she enquired in spite of herself.

"With your parents' blessings," he said taking her hand, "we'll have a civil marriage."

"What about your parents?"

"We'll keep them out of the loop for a while."

"But why?" she said removing her hand from his.

"It's my idea of our love," he said regaining her hand, "to save our love. In turn, I'll marry Prema without your parents' getting wiser to it. Slowly but steadily, we can prepare her and all, to the reality of our lives."

"What an absurd proposal!" she said in remorse.

"I agree it's unusual," he said disarmingly. "But that suits us admirably."

"I will be a game," she said having read his game in the meantime, "if only you make Prema privy to this plan."

"It's an absurd proposal really."

"Why! Won't it suit you fine, either way?" she said pinning him down. "If she agrees, you would've us both and should she back out, your father needn't return the money. Wouldn't that remove the hurdle to our marriage? You know it would."

"Doubt if it works out that way," he said lacking any conviction in what he said.

"Why don't you admit," she jeered at him, "that you don't want it that way."

"When I'm frank with you," he sounded arguing for a lost case, "I expect a better understanding than that. How do you expect me to tell my betrothed that I've a pregnant lover? But after marriage it would be all so different. Won't the closeness of marriage call for compromises?"

"Now, I understand your method," she said in apparent hatred. "Lure women into bed to make them vulnerable, and then force compromises upon them. You want to make her your wife for money and retain me as your keep to pep up your sex life!"

"If I were as mean as you imagine," he said playing his sincerity card to the hilt, "wouldn't I have married you on the sly?"

"Oh, you're too clever for that," she said in exasperation. "You're no fool to bite more than you can chew. You know you would come to grief fighting on two fronts. So you've hit upon this strategy of smothering me before tackling her. If you can coerce me now, you think you can cajole her later. It calls for an evil genius to come up with such a devious plan."

"Am I expected to take all this rubbish?" he said feigning anger.

"Why, were you to fail with her later," she continued her tirade against him, "you would have me still, won't you? What's more, her money too, for I'm sure you would make some of hers yours without losing any time. And in case you can't sell your idea to me, still you would've a beautiful wife, and all her money. Either way, you know, you would gain more than you can lose. How cleverly you got into a win-win position!"

"You're attributing motives," he said sounding sad, "to a victim of circumstances."

"On the other hand," she said in pain, "you've made me a victim to better your circumstances. Betrothed though, you wormed your way into my life with the idea of making me your keep."

"Do blame me but spare my love," he said affecting distress. "I love you, and I want you forever. I know that you love me too. Don't break our hearts and make life bleak for both of us."

"So much for our love," she said broaching the topic of her embarrassment, "what about your child in my womb?"

"He would be my first born, won't he?"

"You mean the first bastard?" she said in all sarcasm. "Oh, you've determined the sex of our child beforehand! You seem to be cock sure in all you do, don't you?"

"Don't be harsh!" he said taken aback at her resistance. "Didn't I tell you its time I owned up you up as my wife?"

"What if you fail to keep your word?" she said in vexation. "Won't that leave our child illegitimate and keep me ever your keep?"

"Believe me."

"You mean I should believe you after what all you've done to me?" she said rebelliously. "What if I reject your proposal?"

"Then unfortunately for both of us," he said after a pause, "we've to go our separate ways."

"Well," she said resolutely, "before that see the child goes out of the way."

"Don't be in a hurry," he tried to sound even more persuasive. "What if we make up in the end? Won't we feel sorry then?"

"You know it brooks no delay, don't you?"

"I'm hopeful," he said reaching for her hand, "our love would make us cling together through thick and thin."

"So you want me to let it grow so that I would've nowhere else to go."

"I don't want to lose you if I can help it," he said not giving up. "You may call me mean that way."

"Haven't I got the taste of your meanness already?" she said, "But if you help me get aborted, I may still feel that there is something left to be salvaged in your character."

"I'm still hopeful."

"That's another way of saying that you won't like to pick up the bill," she said sarcastically. "A rupee saved is a rupee earned, isn't it? Who knows about it better than you, a bank officer opting for mercenary marriage?"

"Well, there's a limit even for insulting."

"Thanks for reminding me about the limits," she said unable to control her tears. "Didn't I bring it upon myself by crossing my limits? Had I not given myself to you, you would've found it hard to decide which way to go now. Having given in myself, I've lost my aura, and having had me, you've lost your appetite. Where's the incentive to marry me now?"

"You're cross with me as you've misunderstood me," he said trying to gain control over her. "But don't nurse hatred for me. Our destinies might still bring us together. Won't the intimacy of the old times usher in fresh tidings then? When the dust of your misgivings settles down, I'm sure we won't be able to resist each other any time."

"I would like to forget you in double quick time," she said as she left him in a huff. "How I wish I had never met you at all. Let the devil take you."

As she walked out on him, she was consumed by hatred.

'Why not I kill him and avenge myself?' she thought on her way. 'But that would only ruin my life further and scandalize my family even more. Let him go to hell. I better think about how to get out of this mess.'

As she walked her way home, she turned her attention on self-preservation.

'I've to handle my parents first,' she contemplated. 'They're sure to smell a rat, sooner than later. Better I tell them that he backed out because of parental opposition. Why, they are bound to be disappointed if not shaken. All the same, how their enthusiasm for him surged my own infatuation. Didn't they make it appear as though all was over bar tying the knot? How sad that I got carried away only to end up being pregnant! Oh, how fate has contrived a parental part in my downfall!'

'What a paradox pregnancy for women is,' Nithya thought that night. 'If a married conceives, it's a cause for celebration, but with an unmarried, it's a means of castigation. After all, man doesn't have any bother in this regard, but then, someone has to bell the cat of nature's urge for procreation. At least, he should've got the decency to arrange for the abortion. But the bastard seems to have designs on me into the future as well. He may even resort to blackmail to entrap me all again. Will he ever allow me to live in peace? Oh, what a devil have I courted?'

As she imagined his shadow on her future, she was frightened no end.

'Had I not conceived,' she reasoned, 'it wouldn't have been so tough on me. Well, I wouldn't have made myself as vulnerable to his blackmail later. Won't it pay to take precautions for women in love to save their skin? Why, the hymen would go away

anyway but how can any be wiser to the coitus that caused its rupture? Whatever, I've to get on to the table straight away for there is no other way.'

'Is death the only solution to my predicament?' she thought as the hypocrisy of women's chastity seemed an irony to her. 'Oh no, what dreams I had for my life! But, how sour they all turned out to be! And that's another story. Now, before all else, I should get out of this mess. But how am I to go about it? That's the big question! And what of the future threat from him? Well, I would see how to deal with him later, if he ever returns.'

While she remained pensive at home, she sought the privacy of the park to let out her steam. Unable to confide with any and overwhelmed by her predicament, she reached a dead end when Chandra fortuitously forced himself into her life. Well, driven by despair and backed by sixth sense, she sought to befriend him in the hope that he certainly wouldn't harm her even if he may not be of help.

Chapter 11

Crossing the Mirage

While Nithya bowed her head narrating her tale of woe, Chandra glued his eyes on her. When she finished, as she looked at him to gauge his response, he bestowed her with his caressing look of love. Overwhelmed, she cried for the empathy he evoked in her.

"Oh, God," Chandra said in sorrow, "how sad!."

"What to do when someone deceives you?" said Nithya sighing. "See what a mess I'm in now!"

"So you want to get aborted?"

"Why don't you help me?" she clutched his hand involuntarily. "I've no clue how to go about it."

"I value your trust in me," he said placing his on hers, "as much as I value you. But is abortion a solution?"

"Tell me," she said helplessly, "what else can I do now?"

"Why, life has a way of shadowing problems with opportunities," he said looking into her eyes tentatively.

"Having undone my life," she said with a sense of rejection, "what opportunity can I possibly have now?"

"Marriage, for one."

"Are you joking or what?"

"Why," he said, "won't you like to put this all behind and get on with your life?"

"But even then I need this abortion, won't I?"

"You could abort the child," he said as his tone drew all the empathy his heart felt for her, "but would you be able to get rid of your guilt?"

"Aren't you scaring me even more?"

"Oh no," he said taking her hand, "you know I wish you well. Why not see what the options are and their likely impact upon your life."

"Thank God, at least, I've chosen a friend well," she said in admiration. "Please be my friend, philosopher and guide."

"Thanks for the offer and know it's accepted," he said in all happiness.

"Wonder how you make me feel relaxed!" she said. "Now tell me what the solution could be."

"Well, we'll go through the options for you to arrive at the solution," he said. "For one, you can get aborted and marry someone on the sly."

"Right or wrong," she said bowing her head, "that's what girls in my situation do, don't they?"

"Well, that's the only option available for the most of them," he said endearingly. "But it's not the case with you."

"How is it different with me?"

"Before we come to that," he said in the manner of counselling her, "why not visualize the pitfalls of marriage on the sly? Won't your conscience prick you if you marry by hiding your past?"

"I haven't thought about it so far," she said and paused for a while. "Oh, I'll surely suffer from qualms all my life."

"What's worse, what if Vasu blackmails you?" he said as softly as he could so as not to raise her fears. "If you give in, won't it tell upon your conscience, and if not, what if he makes your man privy to your past? Wouldn't it be like between the devil and the deep sea?"

"Oh, God!" she cried. "Looks like I've made myself vulnerable forever. What am I to do now?"

Shaken to the core, she looked at him for support.

"What if you reveal all to the prospective groom?" he said sounding as detached as possible from the proposal. "Won't you clear your conscience and block the blackmail as well?"

"You know the premium you men put on wife's virginity," she said as though she was discounting the idea. "And that being the case, who would want to marry me?"

"Maybe," he said, "but widowers and divorcees could be less fussy about virgin brides."

"But how am I to explain my unusual preference to my parents?" she said, "Well, even if someone marries me still, he might put me under probation till I'm fifty, if not longer. Also, my confession to all and sundry might scandalize me by word of mouth. Oh it's no less risky."

"Well," he said, "it's a possibility."

"Oh, am I destined to remain unwed all my life," she said with a sigh, "for just a misstep in youth? How cruel has life become for me!"

"I see a way out my friend," he said as he readied to bare his heart.

"Me marrying a eunuch!" she said with a weary smile in spite of her situation as her sense of humour ensured it.

"Well, the next best," he said and laughed in half jest.

"Jokes apart..." she began eagerly.

"I'm not joking."

"Oh, come on."

"Why not marry me?"

"But why should you" she said a little taken aback, "after all that?"

"I've my own reasons," he said seeing hope, "love being the foremost."

"I think it's absurd."

"Is it because you don't fancy my looks?" he said and looked disappointed.

"Oh, no!" she said taking his hand, "what my looks have brought me but misery!"

"If you can turn blind to my looks," he said nevertheless, "you would find me charming in every way."

"You're only compounding my confusion."

"Don't think that I'm taking advantage of your situation," he said in an outpour. "I love you with all my heart and soul. I don't want to stress upon that because it may not mean much to you now, and for all that you could've lost faith in love itself."

"That's my tragedy."

"Don't worry," he said confidently, "I'll make you believe in love all again."

"You infuse hope," she said vacantly, "and puzzle me too. Is it not pity at work?"

"On the contrary," he said spiritedly, "I love your spiritedness. I've loved you at first sight and now I'm beginning to admire you. I shall feel lucky if you agree."

"Looks like I've lost my capacity to think," she said thoughtfully. "Now help me put the thorn away and then give me time to think it over."

"Why not," he said mysteriously, "I've the rose with the thorn as well?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," he said with apparent conviction. "I would take you with the child."

"Oh, but why?"

"Life is a combination of circumstances as Tolstoy put it," he said as she stared at him in wonderment. "Why not we face the facts, if not for the unwanted child in your womb, you wouldn't have had a second look at me, and but for your handicap, I couldn't have dared of proposing to you."

"Maybe, but unfortunately, looks do matter in choosing mates," she said apologetically. "But then, as the saying goes, handsome is as handsome does. I suppose you're well-read."

"I did savor a few drops of the ocean of ideas, that is, the novel," he said. "And if only you hear my tale, you would know why I want your child in tow."

"Of course, I'm curious."

The story of his life, that he narrated to the last detail, filled every recess of her heart inducing empathy for him.

"What a soul I've met!" she said empathically, taking his hand. "Oh, you've chosen to forego your right to father out of consideration for the unborn! Won't that show your innate capacity for loving?"

"Well," he said his eyes welling with tears, "I haven't seen it that way."

"That's the beauty of your soul," she said touchingly. "I take it as my fortune to become your wife and mother your child. I promise you to give you many lovely children, as many as you want. Go in for the corrective as I get aborted?"

"Oh, how I allowed myself to be mired in the mirage of ugliness," he said excitedly, pressing her hand. "Know you've led me to the oasis of beauty."

"In a way, it is the case with me too," she said holding his hand as though not to lose it ever. "But for you, I would've chased the mirage of disaffection all my life. In helping me cross it, you've enabled me to trace the treasure of my life in you."

"Aren't we blessed really?" he said and kissed her hand while she felt she had a newborn purpose in her life.

"Oh, what a fortune!" she said in ecstasy.

"It's my word that you would forever feel loved by me."

"It's my promise," she said in all gratitude. "I shall love you soon enough and value you all my life."

"I cherish you, Nithya," he caressed her hand as one would a find.

"I'm proud of you," she said, kissing his hand.

"Now perhaps," he said, "it's my turn to ask you whether sentiment has overwhelmed your judgment."

"You may check up at the morrow," she said joyously. "I too have read a little of Shakespeare."

"A blue stocking of a wife then!" he said with a smile. "And I haven't bargained for one."

"When you're destined to get one," she said, turning mirthful, "what can be done?"

"Let's wait till the morrow."

"No way," she said naughtily, "if you want to get rid of me."

By the time they had to part for the day, they turned so close that he insisted he would drop her at her place.

"Goodbye till tomorrow," she dismissed him as they reached that street corner.

"At three then," he waved her goodbye.

"Won't I make it on the dot," she waved back at him.

As he stood rooted with a heavy heart, she reached home in relief. Overwhelmed with joy, that night, they both waited for the fresh dawn with hope.

Chapter 12

Setting the Pace

When it was past noon the next day, Chandra and Nithya, not wanting to make the other wait, reached well before the appointed hour. As they reached the rendezvous, while her face radiated charm, his gait exhibited confidence.

"On my word," she said heartily, "didn't I tell you, you can't get rid of me?"

"You're more beautiful than ever," he said, mesmerized.

"You look all so different."

"Thanks to your acceptance," he took her hand, "seems I've gained in looks."

"I'm happy for you." she said.

"Let's go to my mother who would feel happy for us both."

"I'm not sure how my parents would react," she said in apprehension. "You may have to pull me out from there."

"I've planned it all to the last detail," he said, leading her enthusiastically towards his Vespa. "Just wait and watch."

Keeping pace with him till they reached his scooter, she stood rooted when it came to getting onto the pillion.

"Shall we hire an auto?" he suggested, sensing her hesitation.

"Oh, no," she said, as she positioned herself to ride pillion, "it feels a little odd, that's all."

"I know it takes time," he said, as he steered the vehicle.

"Better be prepared for an aggressive spouse."

"Why not take me for a support?" he said, as she sat erect like a pole.

"What else am I doing?" she put her arm around him.

When they rode to the Pearl House, Anasuya was at the gate buying some garden pots from a hawker. Seeing her son with Nithya, she smiled sweetly at them.

"Take her in," she said in welcome. "I'll join you readily."

As Chandra was showing Nithya their place, Anasuya joined them.

"How do you like our place?" Anasuya said going up to Nithya.

"Nithya says she is tempted to live here," said Chandra, as Nithya blushed.

"You're welcome," said Anasuya, taking Nithya's hand. "I couldn't have wished for a better *bahu*."

"Get us married then," said Chandra.

"What about her parents?" asked Anasuya.

"You're the first to know," said Chandra.

"Would they agree?" Anasuya asked Nithya.

"I'm not sure," said Nithya blushing, "but I would be glad if you take me."

"It's my pleasure, leave the rest to me," Anasuya told Nithya and reached Yadagiri over phone.

"I feel happy and grateful," said Nithya.

When Yadagiri came home post-haste, he found them all in a state of *bonhomie*. Sensing that something was in the offing, he took a close look at Nithya.

"She's Chandra's pearl, Nithya," said Anasuya to Yadagiri.

"The brightest ever," Yadagiri said in all happiness.

"Oh, no," said Nithya to Anasuya blushing to her roots, "you're ever more beautiful."

"I've given them our word," Anasuya seemed to preempt her husband, "I knew you wouldn't object."

"I wouldn't have done any differently," Yadagiri said joyously.

"But there's a little hitch," said Anasuya tentatively. "She's not of our caste."

"That won't bother me anymore," said Yadagiri pensively. "What matters is their happiness."

"She's not sure about her parents either," said Anasuya as though he should prevail over them.

"If they approve, well and good," said Yadagiri nonchalantly. "If not, we would marry them, and in style."

Nithya was so touched that she found herself touching Yadagiri's feet.

"May God give you a blessed life," he blessed her.

The wedding of Nithya and Chandra that soon followed became the talk of the town. While all were overawed by its grandeur, some felt it was reformist and hoped that it might be a harbinger of change. However, many wondered whether the marriage would've taken place in the first place if the bride were less charming for her base and the groom not so well-heeled for his caste.

Chapter 13 **Oasis of Bliss**

While Yadagiri envisaged honeymoon for the just married in Ooty, Chandra was averse to it. Instead he wanted to stay put at home.

"Why, what's the idea?" Nithya asked Chandra when he made his intent clear.

"Don't I know you need time for that?"

"I like your sensitivity," she said thoughtfully. "But I feel we should give our honeymoon a fair chance."

"You're more than fair," said Chandra in admiration

Since Yadagiri had made all arrangements beforehand, they were on course of their 'fair chance'. As they poured out their hearts and bared their souls in the privacy of the first class railway coupe, their peculiar acquaintance acquired the form of a unique friendship. Gratified by their emotional closeness, they vowed to be open to each other forever.

When they reached their destination, they checked into an old-world motel. After breakfast, they went out to explore Ooty's scenic beauty in the midst of that spring. The ambience of the hill-resort and the climate of the season enthralled their hearts enthusing their minds. And that enabled them to shed the overburden of their inhibited relationship.

"Weren't you expecting Rashid to turn up at our wedding?" she asked him, recalling how overjoyed she had been at the presence of her friends' battalion.

"I thought he would," he said, a little disappointed. "Maybe, it's a short notice for him. Or he should've been preoccupied."

"If you're partners still," she said, "wouldn't he have come?"

"Probably he would've," he tried to rationalize life, "but then, as life is circumstantial in its spread, relationships are situational in their scope. So we should learn to enjoy the fortunes of life and cherish the value of relationships in the context of their times. After all, Rashid made a vital difference to my psyche and that won't change, whatever be the change in the relationship. And that's what matters to my life, and that's what stands."

"What about your contribution to his life?" she asked. "Didn't that make all the difference to him? If I'm not cynical, I wonder whether he wanted to let sleeping dogs

lie. Why, he might have felt that in case he showed up, you might as well develop second thoughts about your share in the growing business. But all said and done, had he come, it would've made a great difference to your memory. Wouldn't it have?"

"Maybe," he said, "but in the end, it's one's attitude that really matters to one's life."

"How come you've acquired such depth?"

"Well, the sense of rejection too has its own silver lining," he said thoughtfully. "When one gets rejected, either he gets defeatist or becomes enlightened."

"And so does dejection," she said nostalgically, "as happened in my case."

"Glad you didn't let yourself get bogged down," he said endearingly. "Otherwise, to my misfortune you would've ended up being a misogynist."

"Maybe true," she said winking at him. "What about the dame who gave such a fillip to your psyche?"

"You mean that Kamathipura girl?"

"Yes."

"If not for her," he said reminiscently, "I wouldn't have developed the confidence to propose to you. I shall cherish her forever."

"What's her name?"

"I didn't enquire."

"Why so?"

"Rashid told me all of them go by pseudonyms," he said, "and I didn't want to hear a lie from her."

"What a beautiful way to think!" she said in all admiration. "I feel I'm falling in love with you sooner than I thought it would be possible."

"What welcome news for me!" he said heartily.

"How strange life could be?" she said turning philosophical in turn. "Didn't she lift your spirits for my joy?"

"Don't go by hearsay," he smiled.

"Your testing time will come anyway," she was coy.

"Don't make me nervous," he said catching her hand in mock fear.

"I won't make it any easy either."

"It's appetizing, isn't it?"

"I think," she gesticulated, "it's time for dinner."

"Let's go then."

After a sumptuous meal, they strolled in the lawns of that sprawling compound.

"Why don't you give up smoking?" she said.

"Why not you begin?" he said in all seriousness. "It's Oscar Wilde I think who said that smoking is a perfect example of a perfect pleasure."

"What's next?" she said sounding naughty. "Drinking, I suppose!"

"Of course," he said, "these small pleasures of life add value to it."

"That's apart from the bonus of our love, isn't it?"

"That's the spirit," he said offering her a Berkeley.

"Not now," she said sniffing up the fag, "I'll try it in the room."

When they returned to their room after dinner, he helped her light a Berkeley.

"How do you like it?" he asked her as she took her first puff.

"I shall remember it as your first gift," she said and added as she took the second puff, "and take the drink as the third one."

"Looks like," he said feigning surprise, "you can't even count up to ten!"

"Oh, don't act innocent," she said winking at him.

"What about another?" he offered her as she stubbed the one in hand.

"What if I get addicted?" she said and took it nevertheless.

"Never mind," he said flicking the lighter again for them, "but do mind your rosy lips."

"Are you not exposing me to the vices of life?" she said trying to make rings in the air as Chandra would.

"Isn't it said," he said chasing the rings of smoke she made with his own, "that vices are the price we pay for our virtues."

"So small pleasures and little vices," she said happily, "combine to make life happy."

"The dos and don'ts only deny women," he said enigmatically. "And together we shall explore the thrills of life."

"I'm really lucky to be your wife."

"Be a nice girl and sleep now," he said reaching for his blanket. "You look so tired."

"Is that your advice for a woman on honeymoon?" she said coyly.

"Won't you need some more time?" he said tentatively.

"I've thought about it much," she said, in a measured tone. "True, it would've taken me long to trust a man again, leave alone loving one. But thanks to you, I'm saved of that doom, why, now I've come to feel the warmth of life like never before. I've even begun to love you, for your worth as a man. I think it's silly not to sink into your arms and waste our time. I want to give myself to you now and here heart and soul."

"But still... ."

"I know you would like to wait till I'm truly willing," she said looking into him. "You don't know how every passing moment is adding value to your persona in my perception. Also, one won't learn swimming by watching from the shores."

"Oh, how happy I am," he said kissing her hand.

"You may also know that I'm amorous and young," she said winking at him. "Why, you seem to hold a great promise at that, isn't it?"

Finding him tentative still, she leaned on him and crooned into his ears, "Don't you see my craving for the virtuosity of your virility?"

At that, in undying gratitude, Chandra overwhelmed Nithya with his unrelenting passion while she found herself yielding to him body and soul.

"Oh, what a fulfillment!" he exclaimed, savoring her ardor in the climax.

"What a syringe of passion it is!" she said raving in ecstasy.

"What a lovely well of love!" he cried joyously.

"Give me more," she began to rant in her orgasm, "Oh God, what a man I've got!"

"Take all I have," he said in ejaculation.

"Won't your liquor of love," she said clinging to him like a lizard, "make me an addict to it?!"

"What a pleasure it could be," he said lying in exhaustion, "being a lifer in your cell of *amour*."

"Oh, you made me love you with all my heart," she said, feeling her own body, as they lay naked in bed. "It feels like I've begun life only now."

"Oh, what an exciting figure wrapped up in a silken skin," he said, fondling her. "Oh, how that makes our lovemaking so charming!"

"I'll try to keep it that way," she said fondling herself.

"I'll starve you if need be," he laughed.

"I don't mind that," she said coyly, "as long as you keep injecting me with your liquid of love."

"Won't you inspire if you maintain?"

"Okay, Doctor Love," she said, and pleased with the nickname she gave him, she called him thus all night.

Waking up the next day, Nithya found Chandra still asleep. Fondly looking at him, she tried to figure out the role sex played in her love life. She reckoned at last that with Vasu it had been the physical attraction that had accentuated her sexual urge and her sense of fulfillment too had owed more to that than the satiation in their union. But, the beauty of orgasmic thrill she felt in Chandra's lovemaking made him seem physically attractive in her mindset and her feeling of fulfillment enabled her to love him all the more.

When Nithya wanted him to prolong their enthralling honeymoon, an overwhelmed Chandra took her to Kodaikanal to cement their love in their ardency in an extended outing.

It seems, while for man, the physicality of woman fuels his sexual love for her, it was the sexual fulfillment from man that feeds woman's love for him.

Chapter 14

Busy Bees in the Honeycomb

While the Chandras were in the seventh heaven, the Yadagiris set out to arrange the mundane things for them. They resolved that no stone should be left unturned to enable their *bahu* to lead a luxuriant life in the company of their son. It would be befitting to gift the newly acquired house near the High Court, to Nithya and get it furnished to the hilt. Why not name it Honeycomb? Wasn't it time Chandra stopped riding the Vespa and started driving a Fiat with Nithya? So they welcomed the news of the honeymooners', overstay for it gave them time to complete the arrangements. Also, the marriage of their son made a huge difference to them psychologically as well. Long accustomed to despair that the tragic death of Vasavi had turned into trauma, Chandra's romance cheered them up no end.

"Do you know," Nithya said as they thought it fit to return home at last, "your value to my life?"

"Can I match you in articulation?" said Chandra admiringly.

"As I was stranded chasing the mirage of despair," she said, as her eyes got moist, "you helped me cross it to reach the oasis of bliss. I shall be forever indebted to you."

"If you hadn't been my wife," he said himself affected, "I would have remained forever mired in the mirage of malady."

"You know," she said lovingly, "how I love to entangle you in fatherhood."

"As you deliver," he said fondling her belly, "I will get onto the table."

"Why wait that long?"

"Why become *hors de combat*," he said winking at her, "in the midst of a hot pursuit?"

"On a horny turf," she winked back at him.

"That's for a jackpot of ecstasy."

"Enhancing my fulfillment," she said playfully feeling her belly.

"What's your wish," he said joining her in the act, "boy or a girl?"

"Why not reconsider?" she said wanting nothing to take her away from her oasis of bliss. "I don't want it to take anything away from us. Don't you think we would be better off getting it off?"

"Don't forget it's this child that brought us together," he said kissing her tummy. "I shall be grateful to it and shall love it for being your child."

"I won't praise you anymore," she said pressing his head to her belly. "I'm tired of that."

After a month-long honeymoon when the Chandras returned home, they were led by the Yadagiris into the Honeycomb to set up their nucleus family. As that parental gift of freedom eclipsed the paternal bitterness of the past, Chandra's soul acquired a new avatar. And Nithya, who was gratified at being Chandra's wife, couldn't hold tears of gratitude for her in-laws' love and affection as well. And her parents too were heartened to see their daughter feted like a queen at Honeycomb by one and all.

It was in that frame of mind that the Chandras settled down in their Honeycomb to perpetuate their honeymoon.

"You look very handsome now," Nithya told Chandra one day.

"I don't know about that," he said patting her head, "but I do feel fulfilled."

"It was your bitterness more than your looks that made you feel wretched," she said leaning on him. "It's true; the face is the index of mind."

"Maybe you've got used to my looks and that makes the difference."

"Ability too imparts beauty," she winked at him.

Being at peace with himself, Chandra soon turned his attention to the business on hand. Realizing that dealing in pearls alone was a stagnant proposition, for a new line of business, he introduced precious stones. Also sensing a growing demand for designer jewellery, he made arrangements to subcontract. And to optimize the return on investment and to acquire a trendy look, he got the premises renovated. What with Nithya too showing an interest in his ventures, he began involving her in their execution. And as she exhibited a penchant for jewellery design, he entrusted the same to her care. With the value additions bringing in monetary returns, Yadagiri saw his dreams of a pearl empire for Chandra, with his queen in tow, coming true, after all.

Amidst great expectations, the time came for them to move Nithya to the maternity ward. As she delivered a girl child, Anasuya felt as though the newborn was a reincarnation of Vasavi. Yadagiri, however, felt it was Goddess Lakshmi who took birth in their house. After all, while the child grew up in her mother's womb, didn't their business grow as well? Besides, all were pleased that the girl was fair and beautiful like her mother.

"Isn't she lovely like you?" said Chandra, looking fondly at the newborn.

"Glad I still appeal to you," said Nithya pleased with herself, "but she's really cute. It's all so thrilling."

"I'm happy as well," he said taking the babe in his arms. "I feel it's my own child."

"I've begun to feel it that way for long," said Nithya winking at him. "After all, she had grown up in my womb embalmed with your cum."

"What a way to feel," he said joyously, "I'm glad she would grow up now caressed by my hand."

"Oh, how you make things easy for me in every way," she said taking his hand. "I love you and live for you."

"I'm happy for both of us."

"You know what makes me happier," she said endearingly.

"Well."

"Son, to be precise."

"I'll play my part, won't I?"

"You won't find me wanting either," she said naughtily. "What's the delay, are you looking for a young lady surgeon or what?"

"Of what avail any when your beauty has blinded me?" he said in all smile. "Besides, the operation would be over in a wink."

"Anyway, I won't allow you to sleep either way," she said winking at him. "Be sure about that."

"Still it takes time to go the true way, doesn't it?"

"Whichever way it is," she said, "be ready in time, won't you?"

Came the third-month *namakaranam* and to the delight of the Yadagiris, the Chandras named their girl as Vasavi. And by then, Nithya too began to have fresh vision in her lovemaking as Chandra got his vas recanalised without anyone getting wiser about it.

Symbolizing the upbeat mood at the Pearl House and the Honeycomb, soon, in the collective consciousness of the people of the twin-cities, the old-world Pearl House was transformed into a jewellery house of note and repute.

Chapter 15

Twist in the Tale

That December evening, a young man made his way to the Princely Pearls to give an order for a gold ring. Watching him enter, Chandra was impressed with his persona exemplified by a romantic face. Learning from the salesman that the newcomer was asking for the moon, Chandra wanted him to be sent to him. When he heard the man tell how he would like the gold ring to look like, Chandra realized that it was meant for a

valentine. Besides, he felt the detail conveyed a commitment to the cause and his articulation indicated a loving care. Impressed with the man's passion for his project, Chandra agreed to undertake the intricate work.

"How soon can I have it?" asked the man.

"We haven't yet given our quote," said Chandra amused by his hurry.

"I've heard you won't overcharge," said the man. "I want it by day after tomorrow morning."

"Thanks for your trust in us," said Chandra pleased with the goodwill, "but it takes time."

"I need it badly, and in time," the man said, and Chandra could see a peculiar desperation on his face.

"It would cost 2k," said Chandra having made an estimate of it, "and you can pick it up as we open at ten the day after tomorrow."

"Would you please put your best man on the job?" said the man paying an advance of one thousand rupees. "If you don't mind, I would like to see the work in progress."

"Why, it's interesting," said Chandra reaching for the Bill Book. "Will you mind leaving your name and address?"

"Sathya," he said filling the form, "what about my being with your workman?"

"Come along then," Chandra led him out, leaving the rigmarole of closing the shop to Yadagiri.

On their way to the master goldsmith in his Fiat, Chandra began to feel an inexplicable empathy for Sathya.

"You don't even want to know my name," said Chandra.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Sathya apologetically, "I'm beside myself."

"That's clear anyway," said Chandra. "If I'm not wrong you're in love, aren't you?"

"It's more like I'm in a trance now."

"Why, your face betrays that."

"Well, she says I've a transparent face."

"I admire men in love."

"That means you're in love yourself," smiled Sathya wryly. "But are you lucky?"

"Not before I lost all hope."

"I'm happy for you."

"You've come up with an expressive design."

"Nice you appreciate," said Sathya feeling oneness with Chandra. "Surely you've a feeling heart!"

"Is it the engagement ring?" asked Chandra as a way of enquiring though he knew from Sathya's demeanor it was not the case.

"It's something of a safety ring," said Sathya mysteriously. "Hopefully I'll come back to you for *mangalasutrams*."

"I wish you would," said Chandra extending his hand to Sathya.

"Thank you," said Sathya as he shook Chandra's hand. "Right now I've got jammed at the cross-roads of confusion."

"Sometimes it helps to talk it over," said Chandra by way of inviting Sathya's friendship. "If you wish, you can make me your confidant."

"You're inviting trouble I suppose," said Sathya heartily. "Don't you know men in love make a boring company?"

"You seem to be an interesting character," said Chandra, laughing heartily.

"She says there can't be another like me."

"I suppose she's right," said Chandra "You've a romantic face like I've never seen before."

"But she never said so," said Sathya with a sense of disappointment.

"May I know her name?"

"Kala."

"Honestly," said Chandra, "I'm getting more and more curious."

"Not now, but surely some other time," said Sathya disarmingly. "I'm glad you're helping me out."

"I have a feeling we might click well," said Chandra as he extended his hand.

"It would be my privilege being your friend," said Sathya warmly shaking Chandra's hand. "I would love to hear your love story some day."

"Why not," said Chandra equally warmly, "come out lucky and we shall exchange notes."

"I suppose, I need all the luck in the world now."

"I wish tons of it anyway."

"Thanks a lot for that!"

After introducing Sathya to the veteran and entrusting his work to him, Chandra excused himself.

Reaching home, when Chandra told Nithya about his strange encounter with Sathya, she was so much impressed to express her desire to see the lover who was in a quandary.

"Love seems to be your creed," she said in the end affectionately. "And I love it."

Though it was a week since Sathya collected the ring, Chandra was still thinking about him. Somehow, he was eager for Sathya's return and as he appeared shortly thereafter, Chandra welcomed him heartily.

"Any good news?" said Chandra in welcome.

"It's patchy at the most."

"How did she like the ring?"

"Thanks for the trouble you've taken," said Sathya gratefully, "she felt it's out of the world."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Chandra in reciprocation. "I'm all for taking more of such troubles."

"Now I'm going to trouble you in another way," said Sathya in invitation. "as I've reached the stage of compulsive outpour."

"If you allow me to lend my ears," said Chandra in jest, "you would get my heart free."

"Over a couple of drinks, if you please," said Sathya, "at my place, that is."

"With pleasure," he said enthusiastically, "tell me the landmarks."

As he left the Princely Pearls, Sathya scribbled his Kacheguda address, and mapped the route as well to enable Chandra reach his place without hassles.

Chapter 16

Love in the Bind

"Welcome to smoke and dust," said Sathya as he led Chandra into his first floor apartment.

"You smoke a lot it seems," said Chandra, surveying the heaps of Four Square butts lying all over the place.

"Ten packs a day," said Sathya lighting another cigarette with the butt in hand, "and that should give you an idea about my life and love right now."

"Well, I touched four when I was in the rough," said Chandra as he lit a Berkeley, "but now I've cut down to two."

"And your high was my regular quota," said Sathya, mixing Black Knight for them.

"I've a feeling that your life is rather unusual," said Chandra in anticipation, "that is, considering that my own life is no run of the mill."

"It looks like that," said Sathya looking vacantly, "going by my past, not to speak of the present."

"I'm eager for your story of indiscretion," said Chandra filling soda to the brim. "And that's what love is all about."

"If no woman ever induced indiscretion in your head," said Sathya raising his glass, "then your heart may not be in the right place."

"Well said," said Chandra as he raised his as well.

"Cheers," said Sathya.

"Cheers," said Chandra clinking them.

"The saga begins in Calcutta," began Sathya. "Have you ever been there?"

"No, but what I've heard about it is enough to make me not wanting to be there," said Chandra in jest.

"Then let me begin with Cal before I end up with Kala," said Sathya, sipping from his glass. "In a way the incongruities of my love are in sync with that city of contradictions. It's as if there is that identity crisis with the woman I love and the city in which she grew up. While the visitors perceive it as a hole, the residents won't like to swap it even with heaven itself. Well, it has that coarse exterior but it has a sublime inner, unique to itself. The casual visitors fail to grasp this, and that's why the calumny that's Calcutta. One understands that if only one lives there for some length of time. With people and places alike, don't we form opinions from appearances? Oh, how people fail to see the soul of Cal! To start with, that's how I erred in Kala's case too. But, once I thought I saw her inner self, I felt she is an angelic soul."

"For the same reason I was bitter for long," said Chandra nostalgically, "that was, till Nithya came into my life."

"Tell me how?" said Sathya turning eager.

"We will talk about that later," said Chandra concernedly. "But now your tale takes precedence for it seems unresolved."

"Oh, how nicely you've put it!" began Sathya as Chandra got ready not to drop a word. "It was on 15th March that I reached Cal to join Goddard & Griffith. That was two years ago and as a Purchase Officer for your detail. And it didn't occur to me then that Caesar was done in on the ides of March. Anyway, I was surprised at seeing a peon doubling up as the receptionist at the office in 13, Camac Street. As I learned later, it was a different story altogether. It seems the boss of the day fancied the then Miss. Receptionist and took her under his romantic wings. And to further her professional cause as well, he made her a Miss Purchase Assistant, what was worse, he installed a peon in her place. Though she was found wanting at the purchase desk, yet he was making out to the higher-ups, that she was reducing the lead periods. Why, that made the detractors sneer that the reference could be to her own periods."

Chandra had a hearty laugh followed by a strong puff of the Berkeley.

"As he was a man of substance, even otherwise, he moved up the ladder to the London Office. The man who replaced him thought it fit to shift the favored Miss to where she belonged. But the workers' union would have none of that. You know how shortsighted these unions turn into when it comes to the company interests. And that left the office reception in the rough hands of that semi-literate. One day, however, the bubble burst as the younger brother of the company director came on a visit. In a case of classic mess up, the peon informed the new head that someone from the Younger Brother & Co. came to call on him. Aghast at what he saw, the irritated visitor reported the matter to his director brother. It was that comedy of errors which triggered the move to recruit a proper receptionist. It was thus that my fate had placed Kala at the reception before it led me into the portals of the office. If you are a believer in numerology, 13 is a symbol of 'power' which if wrongly used will wreck destruction upon itself."

"Oh, the ides of March and 13, Camac Street!" said Chandra a little perplexed. "Were you struck by lightning then?"

"On the contrary," said Sathya reminiscently, "I wasn't impressed by her at all. I found her odd for she was a little plump with a fluffy face and nigger hair. Not the sort I would fall for any day. Why, I told my colleague Gopal that she would be the last person to interest me in the world."

"Strange are the ways of love!" said Chandra, thinking about the turn of events with Nithya. "What made you fall in love later?"

"As my job demanded a lot of telephonic talk, she was always on the line with me," said Sathya. "Well, she has a marvelous voice and a cultured accent but I was not amused as she began transferring all and sundry calls to me. Once I lost my cool but apologized readily, and from then on, I was courteous to her and she started giving priority to my calls. Soon enough, we were on friendly terms and I began to see the positives of her persona."

"As we established rapport, she exhibited a unique sense of humor that's intellectually stimulating," said Sathya as he drank the dregs and stuffed the Four Square butt. "When I realized she has a bewitching smile and a seductive look besides, I was drawn to her. And also seeing her competent and skilful she was at work, I was really amazed. So, I began to seek her company at every turn and she too started flirting with me. What sense of humour she has and what a conversationalist she is! I don't expect seeing someone bettering her at both. By allowing me to indulge, she had incited

my passion for her. As I was groping in the dark for an opening, she invited me to come home for tea."

"Don't I know what passion for possession does to man!" interjected Chandra, recapping those tortuous times of his love. "I had gone through it myself."

"Well, it was the rendezvous that changed my life, and brought me to where I'm now," continued Sathya reaching for the Black Knight. "Dressed in a dark blue Cali-cloth sari, she was waiting for me in the first-floor balcony. Oh, how gorgeous she looked and how obligingly I lost myself to her. But directed by her, as I went up the staircase on the side, she came down half way, welcoming me warmly. After my introduction to her parents in glowing terms, as we found ourselves alone in the drawing room, I ogled her charms and she behaved endearingly. When I wanted to know more of her, she just fluttered her eyes but as I pleaded with her to take me into confidence, she was in tears. Seeing my concern for her written all over my face, she composed herself soon. Apologizing for spoiling the party, she blamed her father for her plight. Maybe, as I couldn't solace her with my hands, my enamored eyes took it upon themselves to embalm her with empathy. When she said she finds my company comforting, I felt the seeds of love sprouting in my bosom. After extracting a promise from her that she would tell me all, I bade her good night. When I stepped out into that by-road in the Lake Market, I felt she was as evocative as Cal itself."

"Did you tell her about your first impressions of her?" asked Chandra.

"I haven't, but I don't know whether Gopal told her," said Sathya applying his mind. "After all, when it comes to women, men have their petty jealousies and tentative designs. Now I wonder whether her ill-treatment of me had anything to do with her hurt vanity! Anyway, how does that matter now?"

"Why, is it quits or what?"

"No, my love is in the bind as her fatal attraction is holding me in a vice-like grip," said Sathya having a sip as if to extricate himself from that. "Now I realize, if love makes you blind, passion robs you of your reason as well. Add sentiment to that and you would have a deadly mix that afflicts life itself. That's what happened in my case. As I told you, I didn't find her physically attractive, to start with, that is. But as her intellectual qualities stimulated my romanticism, I found her irresistibly attractive, what with her flirting fuelling my desire further. Though I began craving for our romantic union, somehow, I was sure it was not love. Neither was it lust. I was conscious about that when I went to her house that evening but our interaction seemed to have affected my ethos itself. I fell in love with her then and there and I was aware of that when I left her. I was familiar with the changes love brings in the heart for I loved and lost more than once before. When I met her at the office the next day, I experienced the joy of seeing a beloved. But she told her tale of woes, in bits and pieces that too after much of prompting and that exorcised into pitying her."

"What's her story like?" asked Chandra seeing the similarities in their love stories.

"To make a long story short," said Sathya enigmatically, "she and her younger sister were born to the old man's second wife. Cut up with their father for his second marriage when their mother was still alive, her stepbrothers severed all ties with them. So, after his retirement, as her father came to depend upon her earnings, he was averse to her marriage. What's worse, he made a nuisance of himself by throwing tantrums at trivial matters. The only silver lining in her life is her uncle, an Appraiser in the Customs Department in Cal. It's he who got her this job and others before it. Well, I'd seen him a couple of times in our office."

"I found her story moving?" said Sathya gulping from his glass, "and feeling she was a jewel-in-the-gutter, I was seized with an urge to wash her afresh with my love. So, on an impulse, I proposed to her but she was not prepared to accept though she said she couldn't have hoped for a better man for husband. Well, to shore up my sagging morale, she blamed her misfortune for she couldn't take a hand like mine. When I said even after our marriage, she can support her family; she said her predicament stemmed from a different ailment, and being pressed, she came up with her own love story."

"To tell you the truth," said Chandra seeing their love stories run on parallel tracks, "I thought as much."

"Imagine her being in love with the self-same uncle from her childhood," continued Sathya without apparent jealousy. "Since her father refused to marry them, he waited for her for years, hoping that the old man would yield in the end. With the passage of time as her father became more of a parasite on her, she prevailed upon her uncle to marry another. Though deprived herself, she derived the satisfaction of seeing him turn into a family man. But as his wife and children couldn't wean his mind away from her, her uncle was stuck with her emotionally. So, they are bound thick and thin in a platonic relationship."

"What a catch," said Chandra having sensed the parting of ways of their love stories, "what's there left to pursue anyway!"

"What was the judicious Yudhistar left with when he pursued the game after he lost his kingdom and pawned his siblings as well?" said Sathya as though he was addressing the question to himself. "Oh, didn't he think it fit to bring their common wife to the table as stake? Life and logic don't seem to mix at all, and coming to my affair, I told you that it was empathy that ruled my heart when I proposed to her. But her platonic plight only furthered my sentiment and enhanced my resolve maybe for I found it challenging to win the heart of a woman in love to assuage my ego of being a ladies' man. Somehow, it had always been the recurring theme of my daydreams, probably borne out of my confidence, or is it vanity, to win over women. I always knew I could attract women if I chose to, but somehow I cold-shouldered the girls who craved for me. Maybe, it is their curse that haunts me now making me unlucky in love! I do feel that my fate and psyche together played the part when I made up my mind to win her over and make her my wife."

"I always wanted to be a ladies' man myself but sadly couldn't," said Chandra nostalgically. "I am glad to have met one and I want to hear all your stories in time."

"Why not, but let this story take a proper turn though I don't see it happening for now," said Sathya lighting one more Four Square. "No denying, I went to ludicrous lengths to win her love and approval that compromised my position at the office. Yet as she remained unrelenting, I wanted to give up in frustration and my parents too began looking for a girl for me. When my mother suggested a match for me in Cal, Kala goaded me to see what would come out of it. Touching the dead end by then, I decided to look for a bend in my life."

"What an interesting turn," said Chandra as he got up. "Now show me the toilet before you take me on the bend."

Chapter 17

Turn for the Worse

When they returned after relieving themselves, Sathya resumed the saga of his intriguing relationship with Kala.

"The next day however, she came to the office ashen and I was shaken to see her thus," said Sathya, seemingly confused as Chandra lit his Berkeley for exhilaration. "What followed gave an unexpected twist to my own destiny and perhaps to hers as well. She said that she hadn't had a wink the whole night unnerved by my tentative move to leave her and that made her realize that no one loved her more than me. When she tried to visualize her life without me she said that she found it would be but a void. She said she knew how badly she needed me."

"Oh what twists and turns!" exclaimed Chandra.

"When I reiterated my offer to marry her, she said she needed time to make up her mind," said Sathya with a sense of resignation. "I agreed to wait and she said she couldn't promise at that stage and even warned me that I might even end up with the wrong end of the stick. I told her I would take a chance, for I wanted nothing more than her hand."

"This twist in our tale gave me hope and caused despair like never before," he continued, filling his glass all again while Chandra was yet to drink the previous dose. "I tried in every way to influence her decision and suffered all the more for that. Believe me, the devotion I showed in espousing her cause bordered on *tapasya*. I sought the blessings of every deity to help me become her man to make a difference to her troubled life. Oh, can I ever portray my suffering as I prayed for her happiness and how stupid had I turned in my mission to rescue her? Imagine my going to a *tantrik* for guidance in making her my wife! Oh, how I became insane and smart that she is, she once said the *kumkum* I gave her could be a talisman! But still she applied it on her forehead saying such things won't affect her. What a shame I brought it upon myself."

"Oh. God! What suffering!" said Chandra truly affected, and as if to lighten the pain he felt for Sathya, he emptied his glass at one go.

"Well, suffering seems to be the bane of unrequited love," continued Sathya dejectedly. "But still I wonder how I endured the countless humiliations she meted out to me rather unremittingly. Came a holiday, for hours on end I used to stay rooted near her house just to have a glimpse of her at the balcony, and she knew that. But what to say, every time I used to return without seeing her, though I used to hang on there till my legs could hold no longer. Why, after that memorable evening, she seldom invited me to her house, leave alone going out with me for a treat. That was even when her uncle was out of town."

"Oh God," said Chandra, "how unfair to love itself."

"Well, Gopal felt the same way," said Sathya, "why he said it was cruel on her part to treat me so shabbily. Oh, what fuss she used to make before accepting my loving presents in keeping with her tastes! Why, she left the Kashmir shawl I gave her in the office drawer for days together and I had to go on my knees to make her take that home."

"Why, it's like the police syndrome!" said Chandra. "Harass and then ask to pass under the table."

"Once I said as much to her and she made a friend of hers to talk to me," said Sathya in a trance. "Her friend, Gomathi, said Kala has a golden heart with a troubled mind. She said that given her state of mind, Kala can be expected to act quite cranky and she needs all my sympathy and understanding. She said she believed that with my abiding love, I could wean Kala away from her self-defeating love and provide substance to her empty life. Gomathi said she was confident that my love and perseverance would save the day for her friend in the end. Wasn't it just what I wanted to hear all along?"

Gomathi's testimony only strengthened my resolve to make Kala my wife. Whatever I fail to understand her and she remains as much a puzzle to me as the city she lives in."

"Keep in the limbo sort, isn't it?" said Chandra in apparent suspicion.

"Isn't it possible given her confusion?" said Sathya after deliberating for a while. "And to add to my woes, my boss, who detested me, had his own agenda to fix me. My brewing involvement with Kala, that was a common knowledge at the office by then, came in handy for him to blow it into a full-fledged scandal. To settle his scores with me, he pressurized her to lodge a complaint of sexual harassment against me. Well, she refused to oblige him and I put in his *chamcha's* ears that he better minded his business or else. Well, there seems to be some poetic justice in life's reactions to our actions! Shortly thereafter, Amala the fresher, bowled him on the same wicket, and that cost him his place in the team. That's a different story, anyway."

"Oh, how unfairly fair?" said Chandra.

"But with me life is fairly unfair," said Sathya as his sense of bitterness began to overpower even his feeling of love. "Oh, how she made living a hell for me! Why blame her, as I allowed myself to be taken for granted and toyed with me as she pleased. You know, she even nicknamed me 'mud head'."

"Isn't it said that one can't be in love and remain wise at the same time," said Chandra.

"How true," said Sathya, "once she said that I better go into some business instead of pestering her. She theorized that money brings status to men and power over women, and that if I became moneyed, she would be on her knees, begging to be taken as my mistress. She's wont to maintain that if she fails to make it with me, it would be worse for her as she would miss me having received so much love from me. She always felt that I would forget her soon enough as she gave me nothing but her indifference for remembrance."

"*Femme fatale* plus and no less she is!" said Chandra, feeling Sathya's exasperation.

"Well said," said Sathya. "Once I told her that I better enquire about her at her previous workplace. Stung to the quick, she extracted a promise from me that I wouldn't do anything like that. Though it was apparent that she had something to hide, my sense of decency didn't allow me to spy on her. But I thought it didn't make any sense to go along with her any longer. It had been a year's fruitless wait by then. Also, the trauma of the unrequited love began to take its toll on my health abused by my chain-smoking, I became weak and weary. It was then that she came up with the suggestion that I get transferred to our Hyderabad Office and leave Cal for good. Once I was away from her, she reasoned, she would be in a better position to appreciate what I meant to her. She said she would not take more than six months to decide one way or the other and I managed to come here on transfer."

"What a kind-edged cruelty!" said Chandra distressed at what Sathya underwent.

"Why, you've the words to capture ironies!" said Sathya appreciatively. "But, before I left Cal, she called me home for lunch and wanted me to bring my horoscope along. She sought the opinion of her father, an amateur astrologer, about my future in a pragmatic manner; whether it would be average or less. Well he predicted that my life would hover around the average and as she promised to write to me regularly, I bade her goodbye with mixed feelings. When the Madras Mail moved out of the Howrah Station that evening, I experienced a peculiar sense of relief coming out of a cauldron of stress under a vacuum."

"Is it any better now?" asked Chandra.

"I realized soon enough there was no escaping from love," said Sathya wryly. "Either you're in it or out of it. In some ways, it was worse than ever. If it was the distance she kept then that pained me in Cal, it's the pain of her absence that's hurting me here but the only thing that keeps me going is the correspondence with her. To be fair to her, she is prompt in her replies that are comforting for their contents."

"Glad it's some concession after all the negation,"

"But as luck would've it," continued Sathya with a sense of delusion that Chandra could discern in his demeanor, "sometime back my work kept me at a remote project for four months at a stretch. Such was my passion for her, or whatever feeling I can't really make out what it is, that I used to go to the nearest town, fifty km away, to post my letters. Believe me, four times a week at that! Oh, how I wanted them to reach her early as if her life depended on them, even as her letters conveyed warmth that sustained my hopes. Once she cited the famous 'success quote' attributed to Ralf Waldo Emerson and added that she believed every word of it is true in my case. It was shortly thereafter that she wanted me to meet her at Coimbatore. Sensing the import, I rushed there in anticipation."

"What a turn!"

"Coming straight away to the point, she said, she had made up her mind to marry me," said Sathya seemingly in single breath, "But, she insisted that I must know about her past before I decided about our future. When I said her past wouldn't in any way matter to our future, she said that I should be privy to it all."

"In a way," said Chandra growing suspicious all the while, "won't that explain her past behavior?"

"Unfortunately that's true," sighed Sathya and continued. "See how her story makes its own revelations. That 'uncle' was neither her uncle nor their love any platonic. Her father's insensitivity made her his kept woman and everyone in the family was in the know of it. He was rich and resourceful, and was the scion of a well-known family in Madras, though of a lower caste. Wanting to ensure a secure future and a proper position for herself, she began pestering him to make her his second wife. But being averse to its fallout on his family life, or whatever, as he prevaricated at every turn, at the pain of leaving him, she made him promise to marry her. And soon, sensing that he was only buying time and had no intent to keep his word, she felt miserable and was at loss as to what to do. It was then that I happened to come into her life."

"Oh God, what life can be up to really."

"That's life merciless!" said Sathya animatedly. "Obviously, testing the waters and seeing my sincerity, she came to see me as a viable second to her evasive best. But as matters came to a head, when transferred to Madras, he wanted her to follow him in status quo. While refusing to join him as mistress, she reminded him about her resolve to leave him if he were to dodge the issue any longer. After inducing me to leave Cal, she told him if he wouldn't marry her in six months, she would walk out on him. When she was convinced that he wouldn't oblige her, and being certain that I wouldn't ditch her, she opted to marry me. And to be fair to her, she said that it's up to me to decide, and she won't take my 'no' as a breach of trust."

"What a self-serving attitude that is?" said Chandra.

"Well, I was not shocked but I was surely benumbed for a while," said Sathya filling their glasses. "When I recalled the bruises on her back I used to notice day in and day out, I wondered how I gave credence to her averments of platonic love. Oh, how I got carried away too far to lose my faculties and all. And it surprises me still that I don't feel

betrayed by her disclosure. What matters to me is that God had answered my prayers, and finally I would be able to make a difference to her life. I told her rather boisterously that I would marry her even if she were a mother of half a dozen children. Then she said that if she were to leave him, she had to pay him twenty thousand bucks. I didn't ask why but agreed to arrange that amount."

"What does it mean?" asked Chandra, growing suspicious. "Is it to insure her future against your failure?"

"No, I can't credit her with such meanness?" continued Sathya. "At her mother's bidding we'd been to a couple of temples for blessings. Seeing her pray along with me in the sari I took along for her, I felt she belonged to me though she aired her reservations about my slimness, which made me say that fed by her hand, I would be rotund soon. Whatever, it felt nice when she wished that we got married in Palani, for its religious sanctity."

"But why didn't you reject her," asked Chandra skeptically, "knowing fully well you're but the second string to her bow?"

"As I told you, my love for her by then had acquired a spiritual dimension."

"Oh, Sathya, you're just divine!"

"I don't know if I deserve your praise," continued Sathya. "Shortly after she returned to Cal, she got panicky that my parents might prevail upon me. Well, my father, who was ever opposed to my marrying her, wrote a discouraging letter to dissuade her from marrying me. Well, to calm her nerves I went to Cal and at a friend's place I slipped that safety ring in her ring finger. You would know which one. What's more, I'd arranged for a marriage certificate as my fidelity guarantee to her though her father promised to get us married at Palani in February. Oh, how I was moved by her sensitivity when she told me that she didn't feel like wearing the saris given by him. What a moment it was for me when we shopped together to purchase saris and dresses she needed, to be on her own."

"By the way," asked Chandra, "have you consummated your marriage?"

"Maybe that we didn't consummate our marriage symbolizes the nonentity of our relationship," said Sathya reminiscently. "That night, though she came to me and offered herself, knowing what our marriage in the offing at Palani meant to her, I told her that I didn't want to rob her of the conjugal experience of a proper nuptial. Appreciating my sensitivity, when she said she had no right to deny me any longer, I told her as sex was neither new to her nor to me, we should start our sexual life on a spiritual note. But I did fondle her in love and felt ecstatic in my soul. I named her Sanda long ago for the sandal-like color of her skin. But the feel of her body that night made me realize how wonderfully smooth-skinned she is. When she had left me after a while, I slept thinking about the amorous times in store for us."

"How sublime love can make one!" said Chandra emotively hugging Sathya.

"Thanks for your understanding of a loving heart," said Sathya equally touched. "The next day, she took me to Gomathi's place and introduced me to her family as her fiancé. Seeing the joy in her face and the ease in her bearing, I thought all my trouble was worth her happiness. But the applause at the office was the crowning glory of my love. Though I did take her to the Victoria Memorial for a stroll as if to vindicate myself to the world, I didn't venture to romance with her for her heart was still in a state of flux."

"Oh, how we think alike Sathya!" said Chandra. "Why you'll know that when I tell my tale."

"It's clear you've a great story to tell and I'm no less eager to hear that," said Sathya, "but to stay with mine, I had walked out of our home by then for my father would not have Kala for a daughter-in-law. But when I returned here, after a week's stay in Cal, my mother's letter gave a fillip. She wrote to me that she understood how I loved Kala for I had left all of them for her. Well, she wanted me to know that she was praying for the fruition of my love and happiness in marriage. She asked me not to worry over the home front, as my father would anyway reconcile in the end. I thought only a mother can feel that way, and felt nice for being her son."

"Oh, what a capacity a woman and her son have to love! Remarkable!" said Chandra in admiration. "I've come to admire you a lot and would love to be your friend."

"Don't I feel privileged to be your friend?" said Sathya. "But you can't fault my father either for he believed that Kala was not right for me!"

"Maybe, fathers tend to be a misunderstood lot," said Chandra. "Well, what's the next on the agenda?"

"Waiting for Feb," said Sathya crossing his fingers. "I hope you would make it to Palani with your family."

"Why not?" said Chandra rising to leave. "But for now I better leave, for my wife would be missing me."

"Thanks for your patient hearing," said Sathya taking Chandra's hand. "You don't know how I wanted to blurt out all this for a long time. I hope you would keep it to yourself."

"But for sharing it with my Nithya" said Chandra, "who wouldn't be sharing with any."

"That's fair I suppose," said Sathya as he bade Chandra goodbye.

"Good luck," said Chandra. "I await your invitation."

"You will be the first invitee," said Sathya waving goodbye as Chandra reciprocated.

Chapter 18

Shadows to the Fore

That day, as it happened, Yadagiri stayed back at home indisposed and Chandra went out with a diamond trader leaving Nithya to fend for herself the whole business-day. By then, however, leaving her toddler at the Pearl House, she started becoming a part-timer at the Princely Pearls.

When in the evening she came out from the confines of her cabin, she was shocked to find Vasu in the hall. Before she could beat a hasty retreat, he chanced to notice her and that left her in a quandary. Adding to her predicament, the salesman beckoned her for some consultation on their account. Hiding her consternation, as she came face to face with Vasu and his wife, gathering his wits in the meantime, he grabbed the initiative for the introductions.

"This is Prema, my wife," he introduced to Nithya and said in turn, "This is Nithya. I was their tenant during my probation period."

Unable as they were to close their eyes, yet the women raised their hands in greeting.

"How do you do?" said Prema extending her hand to Nithya.

"Fine, thank you," said Nithya taking Prema's hand.

"Are you working here?' Vasu addressed Nithya.

"Of course," Nithya said dryly.

"I'm at the Koti Branch," he said giving Nithya his business card, "you may know I bank on your account and you too can count on my services."

After settling the issue and entrusting the Vasus to that salesman's care, Nithya excused herself.

Back in her cabin she went into jitters.

'Oh, God, what will happen now if he pursues his agenda?' she deliberated upon the unexpected development. 'Didn't he say that we won't be able to resist each other, if we were to meet again? What to do if he starts stalking me from now on? Will he ruin me all again? No way. I'll be curt with him to start with and nip his design in the bud itself. Whatever, I should be on guard. What he said is true of her. What with her figure and poise, isn't Prema a stunner to the toe? With such a ravishing wife, maybe he won't bother about me anymore. But then, it's not the way men with a roving eye behave, why, he had the cheek to indulge in that suggestive talk--about my opening the account and he providing the service. But for all that, would he ever dare to pursue me again? Hope in the end better sense prevails in his evil head. What about alerting Chandra straightaway? But then, won't it be like putting the cart before the horse? Let me wait and see.'

After a while, having finalized the order for a designer necklace for her, as Vasu led Prema out of the Princely Pearls, finding him perturbed all along, she offered to drive the car.

"Why risk an accident?" she said pulling the key chain from his hands.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you look out of sorts?"

"Oh, don't joke," he laughed half-heartedly.

"I'm sure it was not in jest," she said getting into the Fiat, "that you offered her your services."

"Why, are you jealous already?" he said getting in.

"Wonder why she was uncomfortable with you!"

"How am I to know?" he said closing the door. "That is assuming she's uncomfortable."

"Being a woman myself," she said raising the accelerator, "I know what I know."

"Know what?"

"I'm sure you either misbehaved with her or even jilted her."

"Oh, God, don't imagine things!" he said in mock exasperation. "And be practical about relationships."

"I know by now," she said looking into the rear mirror, "you can tell blindfold which side of your bread is buttered."

"Coming from wife, that's hardly a compliment," he said seemingly offended. "Are you regretting marrying me?"

"Have you any clue of that?"

"I wish you gave one," he said laughing, "so that I too could've a dig at you."

"How do you know it would remain the same?" she said mysteriously. "The charm of life lies in living to be surprised."

"The charm of life lies in living to be surprised," he said repeating after her. "What a beautiful way to approach life, really!"

"But for you life is all about grabbing, isn't it?"

"Having grabbed you," he said trying to placate her, "do I need to grab anymore?"

"Isn't she ravishing?" she said probingly, "your Nithya."

"No more than you," he said, fondling her at her nape, deliberately not taking objection to her allusion, "at least to my eyes."

"I'll take it as a compliment," she said, noticing the aberration, "but with a pinch of salt."

"Well, that's a practical approach too."

"Don't I know you're a guru at that?"

"I'll offer you free lessons," he said as the Fiat entered their portico.

That night, while Prema slept nonchalantly, however hard he tried, Vasu couldn't manage a wink of a sleep.

'Oh, God, it was all dreamlike and ended likewise,' he began contemplating. 'She's as simple as ever and more ravishing than before. Is this the woman I've lost, that too after having her all for myself! How adamant she was in spite of my persuasion! Now, let me see how she can resist me. How lucky I've met her before she lost her figure! Well, she could be some supervisor there and who knows, she may be a manager even. That's the advantage of being a beautiful woman when it comes to scaling the ladder, abilities apart, that is. Which man would fail to fancy his chances with her if she were to come under his wings?'

'Going by her *mangalasutrams*,' he began to delve into the seductive ground rolling in his bed, 'it's clear she's married. What her husband could be? Whoever it is, it's better that she is married. Wouldn't the roughness of marriage have softened her bitterness towards me? What is more to the point, marriage might've diverted some of her bitterness towards her husband as well. Won't it portend a free reign over her body without the bother of her upkeep? Well, but for a gift now and then, Nithya the married would come lightly on my purse, and it suits. Whatever, how lively life used to be with her, didn't every moment of it spelt passion? If only I play my cards well, I may be able to worm my way back into her life as the other man. Why do they say 'the other woman' and never 'the other man'? Only Nithya 'the other woman' can make it lively for Prema's man, isn't it? Prema, oh, how she lies in suspended animation even in her nuptial bed! What if Nithya's man is a he-man, after all, she knows what Vasu 'the other man' means to her sex life?'

'But why should she give in, after all that happened between us?' he began to think about the ways and means of winning Nithya. 'Can I ever break the ice to win her back? Why not, won't women with a past tend to be vulnerable to the advances of their ex-lovers? If only I can touch the right chords of her heart to play upon this feminine susceptibility. But, the real hurdle could be her mental apathy born out of her hard feelings for me but given her weakness of physical attraction for me, maybe that shouldn't be much difficult. But still it would be some work to bring her around?'

Sensing his chances at winning back her favors, he slept in dreamy anticipation till it was well past ten.

'Then is she not a spirited dame?' he thought next day as he woke up to the reality of her personality. 'What would come of it, if she were to try to get even with me? In that case, won't that be a battle of wits in a long drawn-out affair? Why not I give up and get on with my life for whatever it's worth?'

'But what a life it is with a politically correct wife?' he felt on second thoughts. 'Would cohabitation without feeling and sex sans passion add up to anything? But, how fulsome was life with Nithya with that oneness of union and the ecstasy in sex! Why, it was the work of the devil that spoiled my designs on her, a perfect plan that went awry, wasn't it? I've to tempt fate itself to have her and I shall find her alone for that.'

Shortly thereafter, he called her at her home.

"How dare... ?" Nithya lost her track on opening the door.

"I've come in spite of myself," he said trying to cross the threshold. "Don't you know you've a magnetic hold on me?"

"Don't you know I've turned deaf to your lies?" she said contemptuously blocking the way. "Know you're up against a wall."

"Won't I jump over it even if it means my end?" he said pressing his suit. "Anyway I'm half dead with a broken heart."

"I give a damn," she said, "be off now."

"So be it," he said nonchalantly, "but why damn yourself with a scene at your door? Why not we go in?"

As she moved in vexation, he followed her in excitation.

"You look great my charmy!" he said, taking his seat, "better than ever that is."

"You know you're not welcome."

"That's my tragedy."

"Have the grace to leave now," she said unrelentingly, "with the good sense never to return."

"How can you say that to a lover?" he said upping the ante, "yourself looking more desirable than ever before?"

"Leave me alone!" she said in vexation.

"You would agree," he said assuming a pleading tone, "I deserve to be heard for old times' sake. Oh, how you used to cling on to me."

"Stop it now," she said raising her tone.

"I'm only living by your memory," he said affecting distress, "and suffering on that account."

"Don't talk rubbish," she said sneeringly.

"Believe me," he got up and went near her, "I'm miserable without you in spite of Prema. I'm dying for you."

"I hate you," she said drawing herself away, "no, not even that, I don't give a damn for you anymore."

"I can understand your hurt but I'm repentant and..."

"I think it's time you've left."

"Why not lend me your ear before you show me the door?"

"What if I don't?"

"I'll knock again," he said affecting passion, "and yet again."

"Is it fair?" she said in exasperation.

"All is fair in love," he said, "haven't you heard it said?"

"Give me time," she said turning impatient, "and better leave now."

"Keep it in case you've mislaid it," he said cockily placing his visiting card on the centre table.

"I tore it up," she said contemptuously.

"Don't make that mistake now."

"What if I tear it up again?"

"You won't have my phone number," he said menacingly, "and if I don't hear from you soon, I'll come back on my own. Who knows, God forbid, I might run right into your hubby and I know you wouldn't want it that way. It's wise to carry on the sly, why, have you forgotten those days?"

She moved towards the door to show him the door.

"One more thing," he said, as he bowed his exit, "you know you made me get used to your loving glances. Next time, I expect a better welcome than this. Do remember that."

Banging the door after him, Nithya was livid with herself.

Chapter 19

Spurring on to Err

Nithya collapsed in her bed as if Vasu sapped her strength and unable to comprehend, her mind became numb. But realizing that inaction wouldn't lead her anywhere, she forced herself to apply her mind to the problem on hand.

'What a shameless guy really,' she thought. 'What a gall to eye me again? Why, hasn't he hinted at blackmail? What a devil I courted! It's sickening to even think of him, well, no decent man would ever want to tempt the woman he lost, more so when she's married. Isn't it a crime to upset her life, that too when one had lost her by his own fault? What does he think of me? He seems to have taken me for granted being sure of luring me back into his fold by exploiting my past feelings for him! Well, I'll show him what really I am by paying him back in the same coin. Won't I teach him the lesson of his life?'

Her suffering and humiliation associated with him that she couldn't help recall, only strengthened her resolve for revenge. The thought that he was out to blackmail her to exploit her again made her abhor him even more. Soon, she was seized by an urge to avenge herself upon him.

'Why not I torment him by leading him up the garden path and see his ruin in the end,' she began contemplating the course of her revenge. 'But then, won't I run the risk of being misunderstood by Chandra? If he were he to stalk me, won't the risk remain the same, making no difference either way for me. Better I tell Chandra right away, and that way, I can cover my flanks as I take the devil head on.'

Having got carried away by her feeling of revenge thus, she began to map out the plan of action.

'What shall be done to make him pay for his misdeeds as well as evil designs!' she began racking her brains. 'Won't man feel insecure seeing his wife wooed by another male? What about settling scores with him by letting Chandra befriend Prema? But then, why should Chandra play ball? Given his sense of decency he's bound to be averse to the idea! But then, won't I be able to persuade him? And which man doesn't enjoy the company of a pretty woman like Prema, that too if prompted by his wife? Whenever that happens, then Vasu would be forced to put up with that or pack up with his wife. What if Chandra and Prema develop some romantic designs of their own? How one can ever know! If they turn close, won't that make the rogue die in humiliation? And should Prema ditch Vasu for Chandra, won't it be a double jeopardy for that bastard? Won't then, he would lose his wife for her to become 'the other woman' that he wanted to make out of me. *Ware wah!* Won't that leave the rouge staring at a leaf out of his dirty book?'

'But, all that could hurt me as well?' she thought on coming back to the reality of life from the euphoria of revenge. 'Won't I end up with a rival for Chandra's affections? Who knows, Prema's charms might even dampen his ardor for me. Well, why not I face the facts of life? Won't all men end up having a fling on the sly, sooner or later? Moreover, when one plays with fire, how can one ever shy away from the heat of it?'

As her obsession to avenge herself on the man who had betrayed her made her rationalize the prospect of a rival to the affections of the man who stood by her, Nithya was impatient for Chandra arrival that evening. After dinner, having detailed Vasu's trespass to him, she unfolded her plan to checkmate him, however, without raising any romantic appetite in her man. And as expected, Chandra wasn't inclined go with her plan and instead wanted to bury the issue by sorting it out with Vasu.

"What if he won't give up?" she said unprepared to shift her goal post. "That would only make you suspicious in the end."

"Maybe, but..."

"Offence is the best form of defense, isn't it?" she said unable to desist herself from her sense of revenge.

"Okay but," said Chandra in vacillation, "it may all be messy."

"Why leave me to the wolf," she said playing her trump card, "and yourself court misunderstanding?"

"Won't I go to lengths for you?" he said with all his heart. "But still."

"If you keep quiet now," she said seemingly worried, "we may have to sulk later, you in doubt and I in neglect."

"Maybe you're right," he said contemplatively, "but for all that, it could be risky for you."

"What's the risk like?" she asked feigning ignorance.

"Don't you know man-woman friendships lurk about liaisons' fences?" he said to alert her.

"For all I know, it may turn out to be a platonic feeling between you and her," she said determinedly. "Won't sex appeal vary from eye to eye? Besides, it's not that every attraction burns in the groin, does it? After all, platonic love is all about physical attraction sans sexual urge. Still if you get involved, it's but a small price for me to pay to save my marriage."

"Why are you so obsessed with him?" asked Chandra appearing relenting.

"There is another angle to it as well," she said with conviction. "Once he's made to taste his own bitter medicine, he would think twice before making a pass at another woman. If left loose, he's likely to spoil a woman or more on the way, wouldn't he? That way, our mission serves a social purpose as well."

"Let's see what's in store," said Chandra as he began imagining the possibilities.

The next day Vasu at his bank received Nithya's call.

"Thanks for the call," he said as his tone betrayed anxiety, "sooner than I've expected."

"Tell me, why are you after me?"

"I'll explain," he said sounding confident all again, "if only you give me an opportunity."

"Tell me."

"Well, the telephone cables might sap at my agony?" he said assuredly. "Let's meet and I'll explain."

"You liar," she said coquettishly, "why do you want to melt my heart with your pretence?"

"Glad you still feel for me," he said seeing his chance. "Believe me, I'm dying for you."

"Don't get carried away," she said teasingly. "I'm no silly fool any longer."

"Give me a chance to resurrect our love," he said enticingly.

"Before that I want to know my position in the altered equation," she said invitingly. "Well, I don't want to be taken for a ride again,"

"I can understand," he said walking into her trap. "I'll pen down that for your loving grasp."

She kept mum, though excited.

"I'll deliver at your home."

"Why risk prematurely," she said coquettishly, "give me at the Princely Pearls."

"Oh, my smarty, it suits me either way," he said heartily, "but better I give it in duplicate."

"Why is that so?" tickled by her sense of humor, she sounded amused even in her condition.

"What with your tears smudging the original," he said pleased with himself, "won't you need a copy to comprehend my misery?"

"You haven't changed," she said smugly.

"You give me hope."

"I don't know," being pleased, she hung up the phone.

The next day in excitement, Nithya showed Vasu's letter to Chandra.

Nithya Near,

You've every right to know why I crave for you more than ever before. And I owe you an explanation for wanting you in spite of your indifference.

My darling, you're the triumph as well as the tragedy of my life. You know about the joys you have had bestowed upon me, but you're not aware of the deprivations I have brought upon myself. I never wanted to lose you, but

neither would I blame you for having left me. It was life itself that played the spoilsport. How it failed us both to misread our priorities!

I don't know how happy you are. And I wish you are in real bliss. But know I've been living in misery ever since you walked out on me. You may think I'm feigning unhappiness, being in the seventh heaven with a superb wife. I don't blame you if you feel so, for after all, that's what I thought life would be for me with Prema. If not for that hope, I would've never lost you at all, my sense of insecurity notwithstanding.

To be fair to her, Prema is a faithful wife. Fidelity is fine for a *pativrata*, but man needs something more substantial than that for married bliss. And who can appreciate that better than you, being an amorous woman yourself? As luck would've it, Prema is languid in bed, and goes through the motions as if in obligation. Can't you appreciate my predicament, what with my passion nursed in our tempestuous union? Pinning my thoughts on your sensuous memories, I've been pining for you ever since. I'd come back immediately after my marriage to beg for your forgiveness and to take you with me. But then, I had to leave in distress having learned that you were married by then.

Condemned by fate and burdened by life, I was just pulling on till we met so fortuitously all again. Now, I feel I'm better off, relatively, that is, for I've a goal to reach and hope to nourish. I know it's unfair on my part to bother you now but don't I owe something to me as well? Don't I have a right to be happy?

What can I do when my happiness depends entirely upon your consideration? So, in spite of my resolve not to disturb you, I've approached you but sadly, though rightly, you'd reproached me. You may know either I can lift my soul in your loving lap or let my frame slide into the embrace of distress. But I also know you would be averse to give yourself to me. And that's the paradox of my life! Oh, is it a crime to want to live? I beg for a chance to win you back with my passion and devotion. If not, at least admit me into your society so that life becomes a little easy for me. That way our association might mitigate the bitterness of your past as well. Let's be friends and leave the rest to the feelings of our hearts. I hope you won't dismiss this as an absurd proposal.

I love you with all my heart and soul, and if it makes any difference to you, I consider myself blessed still.

Ever yours,

Vasu Dear

"It's clear he wants to worm his way back into your bed," said, Chandra, folding the letter.

"Now, we can squeeze his balls up," said Nithya determinedly even at the expense of the language. "Let's begin the game of one-upmanship right away. I was trusting then and so he could exploit me. But now isn't the boot on the other leg? It's he who's desperate, but thinks I'm vulnerable. He doesn't know I've a supportive husband."

As Chandra hugged her in admiration, she sank into his embrace in gratitude later to withdraw herself feeling fulfilled.

What with Nithya's tentative responses, Vasu's hopes began to soar to the skies. But, as all was silent on her front for a week, troubled by the deadlock, he phoned her up at

her residence to break the ice. By then, having fine-tuned her strategy to entrap him, Nithya awaited his call.

"What happened to my application!" he enquired.

"It's under consideration," Nithya said coquettishly.

"I'm dying to hear, my dear."

"Won't you deserve that?" she said flirting deliberately. "After all, you'd brought it upon yourself. Listen, given my routine, it's hard for me to slip out to see you and should I be found in your company how am I to explain our togetherness. That's my problem."

"Where there's a will there's a way," he said sounding happy. "Don't you think it's more so with lovers?"

"Do you think I wouldn't have thought about it," she said feigning concern, "and that too after reading your letter? The only way out I see for us is through family friendship. Won't that provide us the smoke screen to carry on?"

"It's very clever of you," he said elated. "Nothing but death can separate us now."

"I hope now at least," she said assuming an innocent tone, "you mean what you say."

"Let bygones be bygones dear," he said with a feeling of having sealed the deal, "let's make a fresh beginning."

"To be honest with you," she said cementing his hope, "on seeing you again, first it was once bitten twice shy. But then, it was no shying away from you; you've a way with me I suppose."

"Why deny our due?," he said having been carried away. "Don't we have a natural weakness for each other?"

"How I'll know that when we make it?" she said coyly. "But for now, bring Prema coming Sunday for dinner; meanwhile, I'll manage my husband."

"Seven is fine."

"Bye," she said as she hung up.

When Vasu broached the topic with Prema, she was skeptical about the whole affair.

"I'm sure," she said, looking at him suspiciously, "you would've forced yourself upon her. How do explain this turnaround after all that disinterestedness!"

"As usual," he laughed away her apprehension, "you read too much and suspiciously at that. You may know Princely Pearls is a major account and as things stand, she's its princess. Which banker would let it go without a try?"

"How is it so?"

"Well," he said, "it's her in-laws' establishment."

"Interesting really!" she said. "So you're back at your spying ways. Anyway, let me see where your new errand leads me to."

"Don't scare her hubby with your cynicism," he said in jest.

"And thereby spoil your party with her!" she said. "That's what you mean, don't you?"

"Don't imagine things," he said appearing casual. "He could help in my business and you might click with her."

"Wish it's as simple as that!"

"No more and no less," he said showing relief, "and that's about it all."

"Hope so," she said seemingly skeptical, "even otherwise, what have I to lose?"

"Who knows, she might become your bosom friend," he said trying to humor her. "And I may be the odd man out when you're together."

"Let's see how it goes."

"How I wish," he said cajolingly, "to rub some of my optimism on you."

That night as Vasu slept in excitement, for long Prema was awake in premonition.

Chapter 20

Tempting the Fate

That Sunday evening the Vasus called on the Chandras at the Honeycomb. What with Vasu's presence embarrassing him, Chandra turned his attention on Prema only to be fascinated by her in turn. Seeing Chandra ungainly, Vasu readily turned his hopes on Nithya into wild daydreams. Prema, divining Vasu's desire for Nithya from his body language, suspected that he was involving her only to pull the wool over Chandra's eyes. And that made her turn her focus on Chandra. Hooked up as she was with her idea of revenge, Nithya insensibly turned her attention on Prema.

Discerning a feeling of discontent in Prema, while Nithya felt it augured well for her plan, the former thought Chandra's manner suggested that he could be a much better man for his looks. And calling his wife's bidding and goaded by his own inclination, Chandra began befriending Prema in all earnestness. So, Vasu who thought that he still had to contend with Nithya's apathy felt bold to seek her out in the kitchen.

"It is ages since we were alone," he said placing his hand on her shoulder. "Oh, how nice it feels."

"It's neither the right time," she said, moving away from him, "nor the right place."

"What did you do with my seed?" he said. "Did you allow it grow or not?"

"Do you want to dine on now" she said coquettishly, "or dig into the past?"

"I was worried to death that I might have lost you forever," he said, and added, alluding to Chandra's looks, "to some Prince Charming."

"It's not that everyone takes a woman to the dreamland."

"Thanks for the compliment," he said in excitement. "How sad I've lost my way to it."

"Leaving me in the lurch that is!"

"I'm sorry really," he said ardently. "Show me the way to redeem myself."

"Why, haven't you chosen it yourself," she said coquettishly, "through the back door."

"Glad the spark is intact."

"But I don't dream anymore."

"Now we can begin all again, can't we?"

"I'm too bogged down by reality."

"I'll give you the wings of love," he said endearingly, "to fly with me into the orbit of ecstasy."

"What if my hubby clips them," she said seeming helpless, "and ruins it for us?"

"Why this pessimism," he said trying to bring her back on the track, "when we can hope for a high fly?"

"Lest you should misunderstand that I gave you any hopes," she said deviously, "know that I don't share your optimism."

"Do you really need to?" he said flamboyantly. "Didn't I tell you we're natural lovers and won't be able to resist each other?"

"It's you who said that," she said assuming a serious demeanor, "and I don't remember to have subscribed to it."

"Oh, in your resistance," he said in a placating tone, "your look and tone seem even more enchanting."

"Thank you," she said flirtatiously.

"It's my pleasure really."

"Well, they could be looking for us," she said moving away, "we better join them."

"Your husband seems to have lost his eyes for my wife."

"Are you jealous?"

"Don't you think that makes it easier for us to pull the wool over his eyes?"

"I don't know really," she said feigning worry. "What if your wife comes to know?"

"I will tell you," he said. "The world would have one more philosopher to contend with."

"Like me, you mean."

"Oh, don't joke," he said. "You're too ardent for that."

"What about her?"

"Didn't I tell you," he said placing his hand on her, "that she's stoic at that?"

"Could she have loved and lost like me?"

"Maybe, who knows," he said shrugging his shoulders, "but she's a devoted spouse for all that."

"But you want me to be an unfaithful one," she said overtly flirting. "What double standards!"

"It's just that our standard of love is different, that's the difference."

"Why are you being a liar?" she said mockingly. "Wasn't it substandard when you preferred her to me?"

"Why rake up the past," he said, clearly on the defensive, "when we've made up."

"What if your wife puts her foot down?"

"Nothing matters to me now more than having you back," he said turning hopeful. "Haven't I told you, I live only in the hope of winning back your love?"

"If hopes are dupes, fears could be liars," she said flirtatiously. "Who was that who said that, Wordsworth or Longfellow?"

"For me it's the quote from you that matters," he said cheerfully. "Let's join them."

Shortly after they returned to the drawing room, the maid came with Vasavi. While that unexpected development left the Chandras nonplussed, Vasu wondered whether it could be his child after all. Earlier, to keep Vasavi out of the act, Nithya had packed off the kid to the Pearl House.

"When she didn't stop crying, *peddamma* asked me to take her home," said the maid to Nithya's questioning looks.

"Oh, is she your daughter?" said Prema to Nithya, taking Vasavi into her lap. "She looks so cute, like you."

"Thank you," said Nithya.

"How old is she?" continued Prema.

While Vasu waited for her reply in anticipation, Nithya made Vasavi seem younger by three months. Thereafter, they all had a heck of a time, pepped up by Vasavi's pranks and a sumptuous meal that jelled.

When the Vasus hit the road, having invited the Chandras for a return dinner, Prema found Vasu was in high spirits.

"Didn't we have a good time?" said Vasu to Prema.

"Well, after a long time," she said and added thoughtfully, "really they're fine people."

"Don't you think he's a little odd looking?"

"Only at first sight," she said and added appreciatively, "but you'll begin liking him once you've interacted with him."

"What of Nithya?"

"It's the question I better asked you," she said dryly. "Weren't you hanging around her all the time?"

"You know we knew each other before," he said taking cover. "Don't you think there would be common topics to talk about?"

"I felt you were at courting her."

"It's all in your head, that's all," he said and asked as though for a cue to Vasavi's paternity. "How do you find the kid?"

"Why, it's so apparent," she said, "that she's taken after her mother,"

"I too felt so," he said still doubtful about its paternity.

'It's clear, he has designs on Nithya,' Prema found herself contemplating on the way. 'But why is she trying to appear friendly with him if not overtly flirting! Where went all that indifference! What has brought about this change in her? It's apparent they were close before, possibly, he could've jilted her and married me for money, and now he seems all too eager to curry her favor. Is he blackmailing her by any chance? Oh, is he not capable of that, as he suffers from no qualms whatsoever? Won't I know about the hole in his soul?'

What with that thought putting her on a stream of consciousness, she began looking at Vasu, who was at the steering. When he looked at her, he was perturbed by her stare and avoided it all the way.

'Nithya was lucky to have married Chandra,' Prema thought as she turned her focus away from herself. 'Surely, he's a gentleman and seems broad-minded and well-bred. Clearly he's knowledgeable and mature as well. What's more, he seems to be a good-natured man and an understanding husband. Won't Nithya be aware of his qualities, she being sensible herself. Would she ever think in terms of deceiving such a man! Why, it's worth watching.'

When the guests departed, the hosts exchanged notes.

Chandra said that he found Prema interesting, though a little bit intriguing. Likewise, though friendly by nature, he thought, she was reserved by disposition. She had a warm heart and a cool head as he saw it. That she had ideas of her own became apparent to him from her articulation. His reading of her was that, she had a practical outlook about human frailties. However, she seemed unforgiving when it came to meanness in man. Her only fault, he felt, lay in her fatalistic approach to life.

"The poor thing, what a devil she married," said Nithya with empathy. "Ironically her pop's riches have undone her. If not for her, perhaps, condemned by fate, I would've been his wife. If only we can make life easier for her!"

The interaction of the couples, over the next six months, was on the expected lines with a welcome exception. Insensibly drawn by their mutual empathy, the women came to love and admire each other and that irked Vasu, who was getting despaired by Nithya's obduracy. Adding to his discomfiture and to the delight of Nithya, Chandra and Prema were into a platonic friendship. Though completely foxed by the developments, Vasu sensed the evolving equation would bring in diminishing returns for him. Besides, having a strong suit in hand, it made no sense to him to prolong the game any longer. So he decided to call Nithya to account.

"How long would you have to make me wait?" Vasu confronted Nithya, one evening.

"What's the point rushing in prematurely?" said Nithya calmly. "Don't you see we're laying the ground?"

"I think the time is ripe now for seeding it," he said impatiently. "Hasn't Chandra got used to our closeness?"

"That's true, but..."

"You've got to take the plunge some time or the other." he said cajolingly. "And I can't let you dilly-dally forever. You know I'm at the end of my tether already."

"You should be a woman to know what it all boils down to," she said persuasively. "We should wait for an opportune moment for that."

"I'll create one," he said determinedly. "Look, I would make it seem as if I'm on tour for ten days but would be back after five. I'll call you up from the Ritz then and I don't think it would be difficult for you to spend some daytime with me on those days."

"In a hotel?" she feigned apprehension, "mad or what!"

"Where else then," he said in irritation, "in my dreams?"

"Well that's the hitch," she sighed, "though I'm inclined."

"Why not I remove the hitch," he said meaningfully. "What if I let Chandra know about your past? Knowing our present closeness, can't he put two and two together? Well, that might lead to a few hiccups, but won't that help remove the hitch forever?"

"Are you blackmailing me?"

"You can take it whatever way," he said menacingly. "If you don't come, I may conclude you're only flirting with me."

"What do you mean?"

"It's time to act," he said to smother her further, "for both of us, one way or the other."

"You're making me helpless," said Nithya thoughtfully.

"I will sound you about my program," said Vasu, as he left.

When Vasu informed Nithya about his itinerary shortly thereafter, she decided it was time for the final act.

Chapter 21

Stooping to Conquer

When an excited Vasu left on tour, a vengeful Nithya opened the closet to seal his fate. Retrieving his letter from its recess, she gave it the kiss of death and stooping to conquer, she gave it to Chandra for Prema's perusal. Being on her errand though, Chandra was bogged down with a troubled mind, yet he placed the fatal letter before Prema after briefing her about the problem posed by her husband to his wife.

"So you're privy to my proclivities in bed," said Prema finally in disgust. "What's left of me to bare more?"

"I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to hurt you," he said embarrassedly. "But I don't want him to mess up with my life either. I love my wife and don't want her to get involved again. And there was no way for me than to alert you of his designs."

"I appreciate that," said Prema shamefacedly.

"I know all that was cooked up to curry Nithya's favor," he said feeling hurt for having caused her hurt.

"See what life could come to!" she said nonplussed at the development.

"Oh, how I've hurt you!" he said in hurt. "Now, I realize it's a mistake showing that to you."

"Why do you think," she said, "when you've opened my eyes."

"How to close his eyes to my wife's charms?" said Chandra. "That's still a problem."

"I wish I could turn him blind," she smiled impishly, "with some sort of a magic wand."

"Jokes apart," he said sounding serious, "won't you speak to him?"

"That might avert your threat," she said contemplatively, "but would it remove my hurt?"

"I think it's time we soften life's blows."

"I too thin so," she said contemplatively. "You know I've come to admire you. I know Nithya had a great escape thanks to you, while I remain entrapped with him. I've to admit that what all he wrote about me is true. I'm really cold to him. How can it be otherwise when I'm not even warm to myself?"

"But why," he said surprised, "if I may ask you?"

"Honestly, I myself was thinking of telling you my story," she said turning nostalgic. "But I held myself out of delicacy. It's all so different now and I feel like poring out to you. What an irony it is that Vasu should've put me at the cross-roads of life for the second time. I tell you that you've many things in common with the man I loved and lost, having been spurred on to err by this man."

"I think your tone betrays the magnitude of your loss."

"So your face shows your concern," she said animatedly. "I wouldn't have found a better man to tell my tale and ironically not a more appropriate occasion for the narration. Don't ask for his name and all, after all, the world is small, and one day, for all I know, you may even come across him. Who knows, he may even become a celebrity some day and why compromise him, should either happen."

"Oh what sensitivity!" he said moved. "I love you for that."

"Know it gives me hope," she said. "I'm the only child of my parents who happen to be rich. As my father doted upon me, he gave me every plaything I fancied. That made all the children hang around in our house and how we used to turn it into a playground! My mom didn't mind that but Vasu, who was one among them, used to be fussy whenever he was at the receiving end. I knew he was a bad loser from the beginning. Come Diwali, and my father used to spend a fortune on fire-crackers and everything else but while goading the boys to light them for me, I always used to close my ears. I grew up enjoying the attentions I received from the neighbors and it was much to do with my father's exalted status that made everyone fete me."

"When we first met he was twelve, you know who, and I was ten," she said after a pause. "His family rented our neighborhood house and that's how we happened to meet. All of us were eager to befriend him as he was handsome and agreeable and he too readily mixed with all of us, the young and the old alike, my father included. My father, a learned man with varied interests, and who had the talent to spot talent, lost no time in taking him under his wings to help him widen his horizons. Soon, he began to treat him as if he were his own son and opened his study for him, and drawn by his looks whenever he was with my father I used to hang around there. Oh, I became fond of him, though he took no note of my liking for him."

"As we entered adolescence," she continued as her face glowed, "my underlying fondness for him came to the fore and I began to notice his persona in all its youthful charm. Well, I cherished his face and admired his gait, why, every inch of his frame excited me even as every nuance of his persona enamored me! Why, I just couldn't take my eyes off him whenever he was around, near or far and aware as they were of my obsession for him, my devoted eyes developed and printed his fascinating pictures on my mental screen. Oh, what a romantic face he had and to help me relive his presence in his absence, my dedicated memory animated them to cater to my craving. What was it if not being in love but still I didn't dare dream to own him as he had given me no hope by way of reciprocity."

"Do you know how the fillip for my hope came from an unexpected quarter?" she said turning excited. "An uncle of his on a visit to our house sugared my love by opining that I made a hit pair with him and my father said he too felt the same way. That casual remark of his uncle and my father's reaction to it made me envision him, in school final then, as my man-in-the-waiting and so I began to dream, the dream of my life. And that Diwali it was the bareness of our knees that provided the first substance to my adolescent dreams. While helping him prepare flowerpots at his place, as I bent over him to pick up an empty pot, our bare knees came in touch and the pulsations of that reached the core of my heart. Well, he was in his knickers and I wore skirts and as I was back in my posture, he moved closer to me making our knee-contact. Oh, what a pleasure it was experiencing the pressure of his knee on mine, well the sensuality of that touch etched in my flesh sustained my dreams for long."

She paused as if she was reliving her dreams and seeing her thus, Chandra felt she looked like an angel.

"Believe me," she resumed with a newfound vigor, "even the subsequent sex life with Vasu failed to erase that sensual feeling from my consciousness. Why, as I talk to you, hard though to believe, I feel that touch that's so fresh in my memory even now. If only I were an artist, I would've painted that on the widest of canvases, the entire spectrum of it, in its myriad colors and varied shades."

"Oh, you make me envious of the unknown him!"

"And as he joined college," she continued in the same vein, "he became scarce what with his focus on studies, sports taking his spare time. Knowing that his performance in PUC would decide his future, I kept my love on hold, confining myself to the fringes of his life all the while dreaming about our future together. Oh, how I could avoid his company and lullaby my love for nearly a year I would never know!"

But, as he was through with his exams, feasting my eyes he resumed his visits to our place. It was when my love craved for expression, and as he failed to see its manifestations, I decided to be forthright. But, as hard as I tried, I couldn't bring myself to voice my love to him though it rang in my ears all the while. At last, as though he understood my predicament, he himself provided the opportunity."

She paused in the manner of an orator before a dramatic disclosure.

"That summer afternoon," she began as her face lighted up, "as I lay lost in his thoughts, he came to my room and before my eyes could take possession of him from my mind's eye, he took his position on the edge of my bed. What followed was the scripture of my love that I remember verbatim."

Overwhelmed by her recollection of the momentous event of her life, so it seemed to Chandra, she lost herself before resuming.

"Are you in love with someone?" I asked him tentatively, after inviting him to make himself comfortable.

"Not really," he replied.

"But I love you," I told him, taking his hand.

"You know," he said warmly, "I like you."

"I know that," I said fondling his hand, "and that's what made me express my love to you."

As he reached for my lips, I went with my heart.

"You don't know for how long I've been scanning your eyes to see your love for me," I began to pour out what I brewed in my heart. "But I found none and how disappointed I was. But still I didn't stop conveying my love through body language. But as you've failed to grasp it, I didn't know what more I could do to let you know about my love for you without being forthright about it--I was worried of rejection and feared ridicule even. But then, I thought that I owed it to my love to convey it to you, even if you make light of it. That's the least I can do to my love, that's what I thought."

"I value you even more now," he said, reaching for my lips even as I was eager for that uttered those words.

"I live by my love," I told him, feeling one with him, "and die for that."

She paused again in the manner of an orator to let his remark sink in the audience.

"As he took me," she continued in her dream mode, "I pressed him closer fondling his hair that I loved so much. We necked and petted for long but he didn't seek sex, though I was prepared to give. When, I lay in bed, lost in heaven after he left, my mother came looking for me and feeling shy, I folded my palm over my eyes. I can't tell you how the fragrance of Keo-Karpin that he uses made me recall him making me coyer in her presence. Oh, how romantic it feels whenever I recall it and I do recall it more than I can recall now."

"Well at the cost of repetition," said Chandra, "you are making me envious of him."

"Hope he doesn't burn in your envy," she said managing a smile. "Well that summer became a lyrical stanza in the exotic verse of our euphoric romance! What a joy it was

stealing kisses behind everyone's back at every turn and in every nook and corner. Dreaming about the future while being in his arms was like being in heaven for me. Oh, how my love made my life all that precious! What hopes I nursed for my love and what picture I made of it in a wedding frame?"

"Won't all love pale before your love!" said Chandra in admiration.

"And as if to prove that all good things would come to an end," she said melancholically, "fate had willed that he would leave me for his higher studies, which was untimely for me, as in spite of our romance, he hadn't formulated his love for me by then. Oh, how destiny had put me back into square one, where I remained pining for him unsure about my future as I had no heart to suggest that he write to me to put me at ease fearing our correspondence could compromise him. So, but for his memories for a company, I was leading a lonely life all along then."

Chapter 22

Fouling the Soul

As Prema broke down in the midst of her narrative, Chandra was compelled to caress her hand to solace her and as the warmth his gesture reached her heart, wiping her tears of dejection, she looked at him with affection. Thanking him for his concern, she resumed the saga of her disaffection.

"It was then that Vasu got closer to me. While my father warned me not to entertain him, I made light of his caution saying that I knew which side of my bread was buttered and believing that I was judicious, he took my word though he had a poor opinion about Vasu. What a silly idea it was that I could keep my boredom at bay in Vasu's company though he did all he could to keep me in good humor. Whatever, I found it amusing trying to distract myself in his company though my man's thought never left me even for a moment. Sadly for me, and as it seems with hindsight, naturally with him, Vasu having mistook my interest in his company for my love began pestering me. But still, I couldn't reveal my mind to him for fear of compromising my lover. Putting Vasu at bay, I waited for my darling to come home for the holidays.

When he came during Christmas holidays, I told him about Vasu's pestering, and suggested that he too up the matter with him. But he felt that, as it would be a delicate subject for a man-to-man talk, it was better that I broke the news to Vasu and be done with him. That gave me hope as I thought it revealed the pulse of his heart. After giving me a lovely time, he left after the vacation.

Left to fend for myself against Vasu's advances, when I tried to shun him, he stunned me in turn. Do you know how? Oh, by shaming my lover! He said that I was being double-crossed by the man I loved, as his real affections lay elsewhere. When I protested, he maintained it was an open secret at college and it was stupid of me to shun the true lover and run after a deceiver. When I asked for the proof, he brought in a witness to vouchsafe for his statement.

As I recalled the vacillations of my lover in shock, they seemed proof enough of his perfidy. And that convinced me that something was amiss after all. I felt as if all my dreams fell apart as a derivative of the domino theory. I didn't know how to handle the situation, and, how devastated I was by the development! I couldn't bring myself to blame my lover for he never wooed me on his own, why, it was I who tried to induce in him love for me with my love. Well, I couldn't blame myself either, for I believed it was no fault to fall in love and thus trapped in a vacuum of hope, how I prayed for my lover to come and save the day for me.

"Oh, how pathetic you would've been!" Chandra said moved no end. "Accursed be the love that afflicted your life."

"Oh, you don't realize that by cursing love you are cursing my lover," she said, "I tell you though I was hurt and cut up with him, still I didn't curse him for I knew he had a heart of gold."

"Thanks for showing me the trueness of love."

"Well, with no way to hear his version and unable to dismiss Vasu's allegation," she began recounting the poignant saga of her love. "it was a dilemma that wrenched my heart so much that I felt I had a stroke. How I wished all these years that better I had died that day, as I would've been saved of all that followed! Somehow, I can't make out how, a sense of revenge was born from my sense of helplessness and I was seized with the idea of hurting him by paying him back in the same coin."

"Maybe it's in the nature of love that when scorned it becomes mundane to afflicts us in human ways."

"Oh, it could be true though it never occurred to me," she said stoically, "otherwise why did I do what I did. When Vasu proposed, I agreed out of spite but when he took me into his embrace, I felt neither hope nor any despair and not even spite for the one who spurned me, maybe having done the mischief it had left the scene, but when Vasu pressed for sex, I gave in as though to acquire a weapon to hurt my lover. What an irony! Whatever, I had no reason to deny Vasu, as I had no desire left my lover, why I felt like I had lost interest in my life itself. Maybe to cement his position, Vasu never left my bed and I too didn't push him out of it as if I needed his sex to blunt my lover's romanticism that came to haunt me even though I remained stoic all the while."

"Why blame Vasu for what he wrote there," she continued after a pause. "When he was about to come home for the summer recess, I became nervous while being steady with Vasu and though I had surrendered to him, yet he was afraid of losing me to the one from whom he had snatched me. Well, Vasu planned to put everything into his ears the moment he landed and I knew he would be hurt but, surprisingly, I felt, I couldn't care less. But the day before he arrived, the thought of seeing him feel jilted wrenched my heart recalling how I had frustrated him once before."

She stopped as though she was going through that moments all again.

"Well," she resumed, "that was owing to a silly misunderstanding, but though we made it up, I held on to my girlfriend on purpose and as I prolonged the tease, he left in a huff. While I invited him the next day, he coolly told me to fetch my friend for myself and I told him I wouldn't get from her what he had to give me. Oh, romantic it felt as he enjoyed my comment and complimented me in kind! It's so thrilling even as I recall that now. But that was just a tease. Getting involved with another man was no joke. While I waited for him in trepidation, he called me in exasperation and I managed to be with my father to gain time for the encounter."

As she began crying like a child at the loss of its favorite toy, Chandra's eyes too turned moist. But composing herself she continued.

"Have you seen, *Ave Kallu*?" he asked me, after talking to my parents for a while.

"It's a nice movie," out of turn, my father answered for me. 'We've all seen it.'

"Do you think it's worth repeating?" he asked me again.

"Maybe," I almost murmured

By the time he managed to find me alone, I prepared myself.

"Why that question?" I asked him tentatively.

"Don't you know the answer?" he asked, sounding like he knew it as well.

"Vasu took me on a date," I replied, looking for his reaction.

"How come?" he said affected by my betrayal.

"Why should it bother you?" I taunted him, feeling bitter.

"What do you mean by that?" he said puzzled.

"Anyway, you don't love me, do you?"

"Who told you?" he said clearly on the defensive.

"Are you not in love with your classmate, whatever her name?"

Oh, having said that, how I hoped he would deny that but he said instead, "Is it Vasu who told you?"

"How does it matter to you?" I said enjoying his predicament.

"I had a crush on her," he said lovingly, "that was before you revealed your heart to me and as your love opened my eyes, I lost my heart to you and closed my eyes on her."

I was so stunned by what he said that I was unable to comprehend our situation. Oh, how I regretted having jumped into the imposter's bed without giving my lover a fair hearing. But then, didn't Vasu's idea to get even with my lover appealed to my jilted mindset then? When I could see that it was to gain me that Vasu had spurred me on to err, it was neither here nor there, well, by then, it was beyond redemption.

"Let bygones be bygones," he said coming closer to me as I stood benumbed. 'Let's make it up.'

Maybe pulled by guilt, I stepped back involuntarily, leaving him dejected.

"It's late anyway," I said as if clarifying my rebuff.

"It's never late in love," he said trying to hold me.

"I don't love you anymore," I said resignedly, "and I'm not worthy of your love anymore."

Oh, how it wrenched me seeing his face turn ashen.

"I know you're cut up with me," he said, trying to persuade me, "Believe me, it was just a crush on her, and nothing more than that."

"Maybe, but I've given myself to Vasu," I said helplessly, 'and so I'll marry him.'

"Why do you hurt yourself to spite me," he said in agony.

"When I was in love with you," I said reminiscently, "I loved myself. You can't even imagine how I imagined my life then. Now that I don't love you, I don't even love myself and I've no interest left in life to bother about my fate. Nothing matters to me anymore and I know nothing would change my attitude to life. Well, I've lost all, once and for all, and that is what is there to my life now, believe it or not, but it's true.'

"I'm sorry Prema," he said in pain, and left in anguish as I was hell-bent on pushing myself into a life of nothingness.

Chandra was lost thinking that Prema and Sathya have an uncommon feel of love beyond even its own impulse but as she began crying inconsolably, he was compelled to hold her in a manner of offering his shoulder for her to cry over.

"Oh, if only I had not spurned him, maybe, I would've shed enough tears in his embrace to let him wipe out my past with them," she said as she withdrew herself from Chandra's hold. "But it was not to be and what else could he have done as I closed my heart to him even as he craved to get back into it? You don't know how I cursed myself that day for having undone myself that I couldn't ethically accept his love, which had been the goal of my life. I hated Vasu and I hated myself more so and I was tempted even to go back to him, but how could I, after having fouled my soul and polluted my body? I fell down in my own esteem, and suffered in Vasu's embrace ever since. And so I became frigid to the charms of life thereafter."

"Wonder how did you let your sentiment sway to mar your life!"

"Maybe, that's the hold sentiment has on unexamined life,!" she said, "and placed in the same position, I tell you, I'll keep sentiment at arms length. Well, when Vasu's father sought my hand for his son, my father was taken aback. Though my father didn't make any fuss, he swore against the match. When I tried to checkmate him by refusing to marry another, my father forced a stalemate by restricting my movements. At last it took 'him', you know who I mean, to bring my father around by telling him that one can live with a broken heart but it would be hard to carry on with a troubled conscience. Oh, how he captured my feelings! When he told him I got too far with Vasu, my father married me off in style befitting his status to begin my run of the mill."

She paused as if to come out of her past disappointment freshened by her memory.

"True to my father's prophecy," she continued, "Vasu showed his true colours soon enough by beginning to supplant my father's money as if to improve my quality of life. While my father gives in, thinking he has a cross to bear, Vasu believes that as the jungle belongs to the lions and tigers, this world is for the rich and the powerful and it's for the smart to get rich by hook or by crook. That's the man who finds me cold in bed, and you need not be surprised about it."

"Sorry for fishing in troubled waters," said Chandra visibly upset. "Believe me, had I known I would've sorted out with him myself."

"Maybe, it's good that you've alerted me," she said thoughtfully. "Well, you should've shut the door on him and be done with it. But still, I would've been left with a man who tries to philander with my money. I think it serves him right to cut off at his source. It's time I left him."

"Don't act on the rebound," he said concernedly, "as you did then."

"Thanks for saying that," she said. "I don't want to cry over my father's shoulders now. As I told you, I spurned my lover on hearsay and messed up my life, and when I had the chance to rectify the mistake, I let my sense of chastity ruin me. I should've known better that woman's character is sourced in her heart and not in her hymen. Oh, how vanity and sentiment took turns to ruin my life! Now, let me apply my mind and see."

"What of him?"

"Oh it is years since we last met," she said reminiscently. "But I do hear about him now and then."

"Is he married?"

"Not when I last heard."

"Why not get in touch with him?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"Why not make a real beginning?"

"Wouldn't have his flame been doused by now?" she said as she sighed. "What's the point in dreaming for its warmth then?"

"That's true," said Chandra sympathetically, "and it pays to be pragmatic."

"Is it pragmatic for me to count on your affection?"

"Nithya's included," he said extending his hand. "You know how she loves you. Getting to know your remarkable story she will empathize with you even more."

"Thank you," she said taking his hand, "but don't fail to congratulate her for me, for her great escape that was."

"She might wish you would fare no less."

"Let's see what's in store," she said as Chandra got up to leave.

On his way back home, Chandra felt sorry for her lost love but just the same, he was conscious about a new dawn in his heart for Prema. He couldn't help hoping that she too might feel the same way about him. When he narrated the operative part of 'The Operation Desert' to Nithya, she derived a peculiar sense of satisfaction associated with the feeling of revenge. And they awaited the next move from Prema to checkmate the trespasser.

Chapter 23

Poetic Justice

Ever since the countdown for the showdown with Vasu began, Nithya was feverish with anticipation. The very thought that Prema was all set to desert Vasu portending a double jeopardy for him pleased her, providing the cutting edge to her vengeance. As she was in reverie at the Princely Pearls that evening, the ringing tone of telephone brought her back into the environs. Going for the receiver, she wondered whether it was Prema on the line. However, it was Chandra who called up to inform her that he was held up with some work.

"How long would it be?"

"I can't say,"

"If you can," she said, "call on lawyer Sudha and find out the latest. Damn it, her line seems to be dead."

"Okay," he said, "I'll also see if Sathya has returned."

After Chandra hung up, Nithya's thoughts turned to Sathya.

"Whatever happened to him!" she thought as she recalled Chandra describe him as a remarkable lover with a romantic face. Even as Nithya was seized with an urge to see Sathya, Chandra was puzzled about his long absence.

Later, when Chandra was through with his work, as he reached Sathya's flat, he found it locked to his disappointment but as he got back into his Fiat, to his delight, he saw Sathya coming down the lane.

"I just rang up for you," said Sathya going up to him, "and your wife told me I can expect you."

"I've come here thrice before looking for you and left a message every time," said Chandra, reprimanding him. "I was wondering what happened to you."

"Once you hear me," said Sathya enigmatically, "you'll know."

"Let's go to my place," said Chandra.

"Your wife has already called me for dinner on your behalf," said Sathya pushing Chandra into his dungeon, "and we shall move as I finish my tale."

"Begin it then," said Chandra as he sat down.

"If you remember," said Sathya with a wry smile, "we last met here in the first week of December. Shortly thereafter, I was shocked to know from Rajah, my long-time friend that my father, well, he's a character all by himself, had put a private detective behind Kala. Well, the report only confirmed what she had confessed to me, and naturally he was enraged. Believing she would marry me and carry on with her lover all the same, he vowed not to allow me to marry that bitch, as he called her. Hell-bent on bringing my affair to a close, he pressurized Rajah to go to Madras and appraise her lover about what was cooking on behind his back."

"Oh God," said Chandra, "it seems life never ceases to surprise you."

"So it seems," said Sathya and continued with his tale of surprises, "and sadly for me, Rajah acted at my father's bidding and met her uncle and warned him that he was on the verge of losing his woman. Well Rajah said that he thought it would be a good riddance for me if her man reined her in. Though I felt ditched at that, I couldn't fault my friend's intentions and that proved to be the turning point as I received a letter from her soon stating that her 'uncle' rang her up to enquire about her involvement with me and when she told him about her intention to leave him and marry me, he air-dashed to mend his fences with her. It seems he begged her not to leave him and agreed to solemnize their union at the altar."

"What a testing time it was for her love really!"

"Well, this unexpected twist to the tale placed her in a dilemma," said Sathya, "and she wasn't prepared to tackle a like situation. Given her attachment to him and commitment to me, she wrote that she was unable to decide what to do and which way to go. As she had no heart to hurt him and had no mind to ditch me, she was at her wits' end. Nonplussed to comprehend any solution, she wrote that she wished she were dead before she had to choose between us. That was the sum and substance of her stance and I never felt as hapless before."

While Chandra was at a loss for any prompting, Sathya continued regardless.

"Gathering my wits I wrote to her appealing to her sense of fairness," said Sathya. "I questioned as to how she could go back on her word, leaving me in the lurch. I reminded her that I had walked out on my family and compromised myself at the office and wouldn't I invite ridicule for her desertion? Though I pleaded for her understanding, from the tone of her letter and the tenor of her life, I could realize which way the wind was blowing. When she didn't respond and as my emotions turned wayward, I went on writing to her unceasingly, fretting and fuming alternately. But as she greeted me with stony silence, I realized what it was like sitting under the Damocles' sword with a thin thread of hope separating life and death. I wonder how I didn't turn mad with my ordeal of that fortnight."

"Oh, shit,"

"When I received the post on New Year's Eve," said Chandra melancholically, "I opened it with a premonition only to find a greeting card staring at my face. With my heart in the mouth, I looked for an accompanying letter but to my dismay I found none. I could see the writing on the wall scripted by her silence and I realized that she had decided to hand me the wrong end of the stick. What a crass way for her to sign-off with someone who loved her more than himself! Well, if she wanted to desert me, didn't I

deserve a farewell word at least? Is it the same woman who I thought was an angel? I felt as though I'd lost my capacity to think and for the first time in my adult life, I cried that night in self-pity.

"Whatever may be her compulsions," said Chandra, "to say the least, her silence is abominable."

"That's what I too thought," said Sathya gloomily, "As I reviewed my tragedy as it evolved, the fact that she first flirted with me to attract and then used me to serve her life became apparent and that made me see a parallel in my life when I played the spoilsport in a neighbor girl's life. That night, I recalled how I treated that girl in a like fashion and thanks to my hurt, I could visualize the magnitude of misery I would've caused her and that has come to trouble me. With that sinking feeling and ashamed of myself, I started crying for the girl I wronged and stopped worrying about myself. I tell you, from that moment on, I was seized with an urge to beg her for her pardon."

"Oh me," said Chandra with a premonition.

"And to be done with Kala," said Sathya morosely, "I received the summons from the court on her plaint to annul the marriage and as I chose not to contest her contention, the curtains were down on that peculiar affair through an *ex parte* judgment in a Madras court."

"What an unfortunate man you are!" exclaimed Chandra feeling sad. "How could she do to you what she did?"

"My friend, as I see it," said Sathya enigmatically, "it was poetic justice at work more than anything else."

"Before we come to that," said Chandra still unable to comprehend the development, "I want to know, what you think of her now?"

"Honestly, I have had no thought of her afterwards," said Sathya philosophically. "Why I've been obsessed with girl I wronged."

"Don't tell me," said Chandra in surprise, "how it's possible to forget Kala overnight!"

"Well, it has something to do with my nature," said Sathya by way of self-analysis. "Once I've an agenda, I would strain all my nerves to work for it and should I fail to achieve, I forget about that without any regret or remorse. I believed Kala was a jewel in the gutter of fate and I made it my mission to pull her out polish her with my love. Didn't I pursue my goal with a missionary zeal? That's what mattered to me then, and having failed, it matters no more. That's all."

"But still."

"Since you force me," said Chandra after a pause, "I may remember her as a sort of guru for she made me realize how the fallacy of sentiment becomes the bane of life."

"Oh, is there any better way of forgiving?" Said Chandra in admiration, "But still, isn't it sad such a love got wasted?"

"I don't think so," said Sathya stoically. "I feel it's the force of my love that pushed her towards her own goal. If not for the reality of our affair, perhaps, her lover wouldn't have ever agreed to marry her. That way, my love would have served her cause. It appears that, in some men at least, the infidelity of the spouse acts as a tonic to boost their own love for the erring. It's as if the thought that someone else values his woman, increases her worth in his own eyes! And also, the fact of her loving another man makes him crave to win back her love for him. So he tries to regain her favor by wooing her afresh to wean her away from his rival. When in the end, his positional advantage helps

him to regain her, he feels vindicated. Maybe, that's what would've made him tie the knot with her after all that dodging.'

"Why, it's possible," said Chandra, "but was their wedding worth your suffering?"

"Why, it's worth much more than that," said Sathya feeling indignant. "Amidst my tears, that New Year's Eve ushered in a new dawn in my life. I was hurt not so much for having been jilted by Kala, as for her having dragged me willy-nilly into the mess, involved as she was with another man. Had she declared upfront that her heart was occupied; I was no fool to fancy my chances of winning her mind. If not for her flirting, would have my budding desire for her blossomed into an overriding passion? Surely, I wouldn't have come to grief in the end if I had known her mind in the beginning. As I told you, I always romanticized winning a woman in unrequited love, unable to get over her past to look into the future. Why, that's the impression Kala gave me while actually carrying on with him, love or no love, but with the idea of sticking to him if only he called her bidding. But, as you felt before now I realize I was a victim of her idea to have a second string to her bow, just in case."

"Somehow, it all looked fishy to me from the beginning."

"Whatever, in that hour of my tragedy," said Sathya with tears gushing out from his eyes, "I could see the poetic justice of it all, for the girl who loved me, and whom I lost. As I told you, now I'm seized with an urge to meet and seek her forgiveness. So to say, I'm being consumed by the passion for her forgiveness. That's the sole mission of my life now and I don't wish to die before she pardons me."

"Your life seems to be the puzzle of fate," said Chandra smelling a rat. "Wonder how it gets solved in the end. I'm curious really."

"Oh, beautifully said," said Sathya getting up. "Better we put a little spirit into our souls as well."

"If it's a round or two it should be fine," said Chandra checking the time. "I hope you won't mind telling me the other story as well."

Chapter 24 ***Agony of Penitence***

"I was born in Konaseema," began Sathya as they had their first sip of Old Monk for a change. "It was where I spent much of my childhood and as for my adolescence it was coursed in Kakinada. When I was twelve, my father was transferred there and we were set up in a neighborhood dominated by a well-heeled man with varied interests with a sprightly daughter, two years my junior. It sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale isn't it, well, but for my conceit, the end would have been no different.

As he took a liking for me, I used to spend a lot of time with him and he used to enlighten me about everything under the sun as his daughter used to hang around a lot. When I was in the school final, it was through the accidental touch of our bare knees that exposed us to the sensations of adolescence, but that was that, at least for then.

That summer, a relative of mine, who was close to me, came visiting us. When we were passing that neighbor's house, as she hailed 'hello' from her first floor room, my relative asked me whether she was my lover. When I said it was not the case, he said her warmth in her manner was oozing with love for me. When I sought to dismiss him saying that he must be imagining things, he said that it only showed that I didn't reach the stage to scan the picture of affection the eyes of maidens hold for their lovers. You can imagine how curious and expectant that could have made me, a boy of barely

fifteen that I was then. Oh how tempting it was to verify the veracity of his surmise or finding whatever then and there but it was only in the evening that I got my chance.

I found her lying in her room and as I sat on the edge of her cot, she asked me whether I was in love with someone. Courtesy my relative, I could read the statement of her love in her enquiry but not wanting to lose out on the fun in the offing I replied evasively. When she narrated how she had loved me all along though unsure about my feelings for her, I assured her of my liking her but came to admire her for her conviction of love. When I reached to kiss her eagerly, she parted her lips impulsively and, oh, how divine she tasted! After necking and petting her to my heart's content, I left her, satisfied and excited as well. It was the first time I had ever got so close to a girl, and it was such a thrill! But somehow I didn't fall in love with her, maybe because she bestowed her affections much before I started valuing them. Whatever, till that night of poetic justice, I thought I was very smart in dealing with her that day.

"And from then on, on and off, I used to meet her, to steal some memorable moments. But never did I allow myself to press her for the final favor. Maybe, I was too young to want sex, or I didn't wish any complications for either of us. Yet, I made tentative enquiries with some classmates about contraceptives, but to no avail. And you know the level of our sexual awareness at that age in those days.

"But as I got into the PUC, I developed a calf-love for my classmate, well, nothing came out of it but still that pushed that girl farther on the backburner. Then I went to Ranchi after my PUC to join the BIT, and we were further distanced, even when I went home for the Dasara, bogged down with friends, I ignored her by and large. Sadly, as I feel now, I didn't even bother to tell her about the date of my return journey but when I went again for Christmas, she told me that the last time she had been awake to see me leave for the railway station at two in the morning. Moved by that, I realized how I took her love for granted and it was then that my liking for her transformed into an adoration leading to love, well, by then I was through that calf-love. You can imagine how we both would've been moved as we looked at each other at the dead of that night as I left for the railway station after the vacation. Oh, how her eyes glowed as she waved me goodbye. But, as fate had willed it, literally it turned out to be the goodbye from her.

"Oh, God," Chandra blurted out.

"When I came back for the summer recess," Sathya resumed animatedly, "it was as if the heat had turned on me. Even as I was rushing to see her, someone told me, on purpose, that she got close to a boy of our locality and that she had been to the movie *Ave Kallu* with her beau the other day. Disturbed at what I heard, I enquired with her about the veracity of it all."

While she owned up her affair with that character, she told me that she too was privy to the affairs of my heart. When I said that we could make a new beginning, she told me she didn't love me any more but what pained me more than her rejection was her averment that as long as she was in love with me, she had great hopes about her life and after what had happened, she wouldn't care two hoots about her own life. While I wanted to keep all that behind us, sadly, she told me she was not worthy of me anymore, having already given herself to that guy. It was a great blow to me too, as by then; I began loving her like as an adult as insensibly her devotion to me dwarfed my calf-love for another. You can imagine how wretched it could be losing her not only for my sake but for hers as well and so feeling guilty and being helpless, I stepped aside as she carried on with him."

"How wrenching could be that feeling?" said Chandra having got a clear picture of it all by then.

'It was of my own making for I failed to make her see the depth of my love for her,' said Sathya remorsefully. 'But, given my nature, I got on with my life, and the whole thing went into the backyard of my memory. Anyway, we remained friends, though we never talked about our past and it was my argument that made her father to relent in his objection to her marrying that guy. Since my parents too shifted out of Kakinada shortly thereafter, I lost contact with her altogether. As we do have some common friends, now I'm in the lookout for them. Oh, how all these years I treated that as a missed opportunity at the best, and a failed affair at the worst. Never did I realize that I was the villain of her life. But, that night, in the hour of my ruin, while visualizing the source of her trauma I had a measure of mine own meanness.'

"What about her pain?" Chandra couldn't help but say. "Could you ever visualize it?"

"Why, it's my grasp of her pain that's the source of my shame,' said Sathya holding back his tears that had filled his eyes by then. 'If only I was honest to tell her about my infatuation for my classmate, she wouldn't have nursed false hopes on me, would she have? If only she knew about my love for another, what if it's a calf-love, she wouldn't have hoped to convert my tentative interest in her into an abiding love for her, and had I been truthful, she would've reined in her heart to keep her nascent love a sweet memory of youth to be cherished on occasion in life. And what happened instead? I'd furthered her love to fuel her passion, only to wound her psyche in the end! And then, how I failed to give her the picture of my own love when I really started loving her genuinely. Oh, how I've wronged her! What did I give her in return for her love? It dawned on me too that while I was patting myself for so long for being smart, she found herself smarting from my duplicity. Oh how distressing it is to think of that now and am I not ashamed of myself for being so crass with her. My inexperience of life is no excuse really. The fact that I could be so insensitive for that long, about something so apparent, makes me appear mean in my own eyes. As I fell in my own esteem, I crave for her pardon and though she got it even with me in the end, I think, it's no consolation for her for what all she had suffered at my hands.'

"I'm sure your meeting her helps," said Chandra.

"That's again a dilemma," said Sathya resignedly. "I'm dying to apologize to her telling the telling affects of poetic justice on my life but I'm afraid my trespass on her life might open up her old wounds making her even sorer about it now. At least, I can spare her that, shouldn't I? I feel it is better that I wait till we grow older by which time she would've put the memory of my deceit in the vault of her forgotten past, which means that I've to bear my cross that long or may even die with my burden of guilt intact. That's about the uncertainty of life and death."

"It's no choice of love?"

"Sadly we both took turns to let down our love when life gave us the choice," said Sathya

"Is it your guilt alone that's urging you to see her?" said Chandra probing further.

"I'm craving to see her more than ever," said Sathya, lamenting about his loss, "and to put it in Kala's words, I'm the one who lost her love. As I told you, I was blind to her charms in the beginning, but after losing her I realized what a desirable woman she is. The irony of our love was that she came into my life as a *kaccha* girl and got out of it as a *pucca* woman, making it a premature affair either way. Had she not disclosed her love to me then, I would've fallen for her as she grew up anyway. The ironical tragedy of our love-less life is that she courted me when I was half-hearted and banished me when I craved for her heart and soul."

"I think," said Chandra, "it's time we moved."

"If you don't mind," said Sathya, "I would freshen up."

'Oh, how small the world really is,' thought Chandra in wonderment, 'why, smaller than Prema would've ever imagined! But then, hasn't Sathya thrown me into a dilemma? Left to us, won't Prema's path of divorce take us to *ménage á trios* sooner or later? Maybe, sooner than later, that is. What a wonderful woman she's to have, that too with Nithya's prop up! Oh, how that would enliven my own life even more! But, having known it all, won't it be cruel to keep the wronged lovers apart that too when they need each other more than ever before. What if I'm caught at some point of time, Nithya might be sympathetic but can I ever show my face to Prema? Oh, how saddened she would be to know that she was fated to have tricksters for mates. More so, if I fail them, won't I have to live in guilt all my life? Well, let me render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.'

"What are you thinking about?" said Sathya, who got ready by then. "Let's go, you'll know."

Powered by a sense of goodwill, Chandra drove Sathya towards his destiny.

"Wait. I shall open it," said Sathya, as Chandra stopped the Fiat at that gate.

"Why not," said Chandra to Sathya, "the calling bell is on the left."

"What about you?"

"I'll join you in time,"

As Sathya pressed the button tentatively, Chandra drove away assuredly.

Chapter 25

Embrace of Love

With no response for long, Sathya held on to the buzzer a little longer. When Prema opened the door in her bathrobe, she found herself staring wide-eyed as Sathya remained speechless.

"Oh, you," she welcomed him being the first to recover, "looks like its Godsend."

"What a pleasant surprise!"

"What do you mean?" she said, surprised in turn.

"I find it's all so puzzling," he said trying to figure out the equation, "you, at Chandra's place!"

"What!" she exclaimed looking at the gate.

"I thought it's his house," he said equally surprised.

"How long have you known each other?" she said having come to see Chandra's good turn.

"We met only recently," he said unable to make head or tail of the equation.

"Oh, I see, step into our small world," she said in delight.

"How kind of him that he brought me to the threshold," said Sathya smelling a rat, and went in behind her.

"I told him our story without naming you," she said.

"Now I see," said Sathya sitting in the sofa, "he made it two plus two after hearing my version of it. What a lovely way he made us meet!"

"I'm glad you still recall our saga," she said, sitting by his side.

"Can either of us ever forget it?" he said and added in apparent hurry. "I'm dying to tell you something. When is Vasu expected?"

"He won't be back till a week," she said all smiles. "So you've all my eyes and ears till then."

"Thank you," he said smilingly, "but I won't bore you for that long."

"Hope you don't mind if I engage you as long," she said, going into the kitchen. "Let's have some coffee first."

"It is ages since I had anything from your hand," he said, following her into the kitchen.

"Haven't you got married?"

"I failed to induce any."

"Don't tell lies," she said heartily, "you ladies' man!"

"Don't you know I'm unlucky in love?" as he said, his manner mirrored the sadness of his heart.

"Don't be so mean," she said equally affected by his manner. "Why don't you say we're unlucky in love?"

"I was blind to your beauty when you loved me," he said as he sighed. "And when I could visualize your charms, you opted to get out of my sight, that's the crux of my tragedy."

"Don't you realize the same was the case with me?" she said sounding sad. "I craved for you when you were tentative and shunned you as you were insistent."

"To tell you the truth," he began tentatively, "I realized only recently how my conceit would've affected your life. It took the meanness of a woman to make me realize how mean I was to you. It was a sort of poetic justice for you that made me cry in shame and regret all that night. Ever since, I was dying to tell you that fate had paid me back in the same coin. I hope you will care to listen, at least this time."

"I'm sorry on both counts," she said melancholically. "Don't I know that not giving you my ear then was the cause of my ruin? How I rued that mistake I only know. Maybe, I owed it to my horrible fate. Barring that accursed time, I always felt your fortunes and misfortunes are mine as well. Oh, tell me what happened?"

As Sathya narrated the tale of his unrequited love, Prema saw the mirror images of her past agonies.

"It's thus fate made it even for me," he said in the end. "Now it's up to you to forgive me."

"Oh, your suffering was ethereal for its purity of love and the spirit of sacrifice," she said moved herself. "But my predicament was all about hurt pride fouled up by spite."

"Whatever it was," he said, "you'd undergone what you'd undergone because of me. I seek your forgiveness if you don't feel the same bitterness now."

"I've always felt you've a heart of gold and the soul of a saint, in spite of that sin that is," she said holding his hand. "I'm happy that my belief in you is proved right."

"Your understanding is heartening," impulsively he went on his knees to her. "But it's your forgiveness that I seek."

"Get it straight from my heart," she said, pushing his head onto her bosom.

"You don't know," he said, resting his head on her bust, "how tiring it is forever losing in love."

"I'm sorry for you," she pressed him further.

"Have you forgiven me for my sin?" he asked looking into her eyes.

"Kiss me," she said, lifting his head and reaching for his lips, "like you kissed the first time."

So to retrieve their lost souls, they found themselves digging with their tongues in deep kissing. And then the phone rang as though to prevent a premature beginning to their momentous reunion.

"It's Prema here."

"Nithya calling, am I disturbing?"

"Benefactors won't disturb," said Prema joyously, "do they?"

"How's the bonanza of love?" said Nithya, unable to restrain herself.

"Oh what a dream Chandra scripted for us," said Prema in the same vein. "Sathya wants to thank him."

"Hi Sathya!" said Chandra at the other end.

"Why, don't I count anymore?" said Prema who still held on to the receiver.

"I know you've got your right count," said Chandra. "I'm happy for you really."

"Didn't I tell you," said Prema, "you and Sathya have many things in common?"

"Thank you for repeating it," said Chandra.

"Well, Sathya is impatient," said Prema.

"I am indebted to you," said Sathya to Chandra, "for helping me to unburden myself."

"What about crossing the mirage?" asked Chandra.

"I'm bogged down with tears."

"Then let me speak to Prema."

"Hello, tell me," said Prema.

"Do hold on," said Chandra. "Nithya says now it's her turn."

"Why not yourself lead him to the oasis?" said Nithya all the while sharing the receiver with Chandra.

"Well, my tears of joy are shaping one!" said Prema.

"Make it big enough for bathing in love," said Nithya laughingly. "Good night."

"I'll tell you tomorrow," said Prema coyly, "and good night for now."

"Tell me about you," said Sathya as Prema had hung up.

"Discourse after dinner."

"I'm hungry for both."

Prema after dinner bared her soul and detailed Vasu's character.

"I thought marriage would've changed him," he said feeling sad for her predicament, "and you could be happy yourself. I'm sorry for your misery."

"Maybe, I deserved this fate," she said in tears. "Oh, why did I reject you out of hand?"

"It was natural after all," he tried to lighten her burden.

"I didn't realize I was cutting my nose out of spite for you."

"Now that we know our minds," he said, "we'll be less bitter about it all."

"Mud head," she tapped on his head. "I think I'm destined to take the initiative when it comes to us. I've filed for divorce and hope to be single soon enough. Won't you like to marry me after I'm free, and make me yours in the meantime?"

"Oh, really!" he said as he hugged her in ecstasy, "what a windfall to our love at your seductive best!"

As she melted in his embrace, he lost no time in making her crouch on the couch to enter the arena of her longing. At length, fulfilled, as she stretched her limbs, satiated, he lay outstretched on her.

"Oh, God, I now know the true meaning of sex for a woman," she said, smelling Keo-Karpin in his hair. "Sex seems to be more real for a woman than all the pining of her love. Had you had me that first day, the latter-day aberrations wouldn't have disturbed our equation. What a pity, all your loving entreaties failed to sway me away from Vasu for I had had sex with him by then."

She kept mum as if atoning for her folly while he reminisced over the night of Kala's advances.

"Strangely sex seems to affect the sexes differently," she continued. "The more a man has a woman, the more he finds his urge waning. And woman's attachment to her man deepens with sex though it's a case of diminishing returns for her body. Oh, how men of lust tend women into sex as men in love long for their heart! It's the tragedy of woman that if she gives in to the lusting, either she gets jilted to her hurt or lies trapped in a deadlock of wedlock."

"In that case," said Sathya in surprise, "with Kala was it not a wild-goose chase for me?"

"Why, you had your chance with her," said Prema continuing in the same vein. "I'm sure you'd lost her the night you declined her final favor. Had you had her then, I'm sure you would've been in the reckoning in the crunch situation. Well, depending on how you appealed to her in bed, you would've weighed in her mind. But fortunately for us, it's a case of two wrongs becoming a right, isn't it?"

"Maybe, you're right about her," said Sathya, tapping her lips. "But what's the feedback from you?"

"If you haven't found it cold," she said leaning onto him, "won't that answer your question?"

"It's like I was in a hot chamber."

"Can't I count on your coolant to curb its heat?"

"Won't your charms keep up my supply lines?"

"Here's my fresh indent," she pushed her breast into his mouth as a prelude.

In their newfound love, reluctant to part with each other, they slept in each other's arms at the exhausted end of that night.

Chapter 26

Life of a Kind

Waking up at eight, Prema sprang to her feet to ring up her friend and as Nithya was waiting for her call, she answered the call by the first ring itself.

"What a coup in the making!" a joyous Nithya soon appraised Chandra about the development and its import on the final act.

"Don't get carried away and spill the beans," Chandra cautioned her. "Let it pass off as a twist of destiny."

After speaking to Nithya, Prema sat down to draft a new twist to Vasu's destiny. At length, she went to Sathya only to find him stirring in the bed. When she sat on the bed to wake him up, he pulled her into his arms.

"I wish we begin afresh," he said winking at her.

"Won't you help me end this chapter first?" she said smug in his embrace.

"Only as a sequel," he said squeezing her hip.

At length, as they got up for the day, she went into the kitchen.

"There are things to sort out right away," said Prema as they had their coffee.

"Assign my duties," he said, "and the responsibilities."

"Like Kala before me," said Prema deliberately, "I want to acquire a fresh wardrobe."

"You're welcome."

"Likewise," she said, "I want to shed him off all that my father gave us."

"Why to go to such lengths?" said Sathya a little taken aback.

"Well, it's my whim?" she said spiritedly.

"But still."

"Stop being considerate to all and sundry," she said unrelenting. "Won't it do that I gift them away to the needy of the neighborhood?"

"It's a point of view."

"Let's put the car on sale," she said in the same vein. "And donate the proceeds to some orphanage."

"Rob Peter to pay Paul."

"Why forget he robbed your honey to butter his bread?"

"I wonder how your parents will react," he said coming to reality.

"Can't you imagine?" she told him assuredly. "Don't you know how they wanted me to be your wife? It would be better late than never for them."

"What a day it would be!" he said dreamily.

"Our wedding day!" she smiled coyly.

"That be our own day," he said taking her into his arms, "for the rest of our life."

"I wish we will be around," she said sinking into his embrace, "to celebrate the golden jubilee."

"Well, the law of averages might help," he said hopefully, "for the way we have suffered so far."

"It's my promise," she said lovingly. "I will strive to make you happy every day of those fifty years."

"Are you on the pill or what?" he asked tentatively.

"It didn't happen that's all."

"Hope our aggregate improves," he crooned into her ear.

"Am I not desperate to bear your child?" she said happily. "But for now think of the job on hand."

"You cover the neighborhood and I'll go round the town," he said giving her his hand. "Is it okay?"

"Get me light blue lingerie for our first night in your flat," she said coyly, "that is, after dinner at the Chandras. Well I forgot to tell you that we're invited as a couple."

"Made for each other I suppose," he said and added in undertone, "what about the made for you uppers and lowers?"

"Don't forget to pick up some petticoats as well," she said aloud after whispering in his ears.

That evening, dumping the purchases at his flat, they set out for dinner at the Honeycomb.

"You're an expert," said Sathya watching her drive.

"Are you any less," she said winking at him, "in handling the fair sex."

"Don't you make much of it?" he said feeling flattered.

"Oh, how kind is God to us!" she said dreamily.

"Of the rarest kind, isn't it?"

"How I felt like praying to God to get you back," she said nostalgically. "But I didn't dare after all that."

"Assuming there is God," he said philosophically, "He's not amenable to your prayers. I've come to realize that."

"Have you become an atheist or what!" she said struck by the conviction of his tone.

"As I told you," he began nostalgically, "I believed Kala was a mislaid jewel to be retrieved with my love, and understandably, I turned to God for help. And for over a year, though the deities differed, my prayer remained the same: oh, God make me the means of her happiness! And how fervently I used to pray! Believe me, my own fulfillment through marriage was never in my mind. Wonder how I could become so selfless in my endeavour! Why, the singularity of the appeal and the constancy of my prayer had to be seen to be believed! It was nothing short of a *tapasya*."

"I can see from your face," she said stopping the car by the roadside as her eyes welled up, "your capacity to love. Why I couldn't see it then when I snubbed you? Maybe I've noticed that with my mind's eye, if not why did that look of yours come to solace me ever since?"

"Won't we make up Prema!" he said wiping her tears.

"Now that God has willed it," she said, "I know we will."

"Well," he said stoically, "when I failed with Kala, it made me introspect about the power of prayer over the will of God. Could there have been a more worthy cause and a selfless prayer than mine? Yet, why did God dispose of my proposal! For all I know, God is but a myth and even if there is one I've realized, he would only grant that which He

thinks fit and not what we might pray for. Any way you look at it, we can't bend His will through prayer and if there is none, well, it's a waste of time."

"Maybe your theory," she said as she steered the car back on to the road, "leaves no scope for anything contrary."

"It was then I turned to the *Bhagavad Gita* only to find it was all there in it to the last detail," he said in apparent admiration for it and added, "It's the tragedy of man that he doesn't benefit from the existing wisdom."

"How true," she said, "but do tell me about life in Calcutta."

"I don't know why," he began reminiscently, "but the Howrah Bridge always fascinated me ever since I'd seen it in the title movie starring Madhubala. It's a different matter that her love story is no less fascinating than her persona, and her life as poignant as her death, at only thirty-six. You know what a fan of hers I was but you don't know that I mourned her death like a lover, as you know, I was in Ranchi then."

"I was no less lovelorn then," she said with a sigh. "Maybe, the saving grace of unrequited love is that it makes a fascinating story. And what an irony that is!"

"True, but our story of rediscovery" he said lovingly, "makes it a fairy tale really."

"Isn't it written all over our faces?" she said joyously. "Now continue with your Calcutta."

"That morning when I first set foot there," he resumed, "I was awestruck finding the cantilever bridge right across the railway station. As I crossed it in a cab, I was overawed by its awesome grandeur. Many times over, I used to saunter on it only to experience a peculiar sense of solace looking at the Hooghly down below. Come evening and all that would change. The sprawling structure becomes a hindrance to those who have to catch the trains that leave the Howrah station around that time. The traffic jams that stretch up to miles send people in the cabs and cars alike into jitters. But the ingenuity of the coolies provides escape routes for those who're willing to venture out. With your baggage as head load in their bamboo trays, with you in tow, they meander their way over the bridge to the railway station and imagine boarding the trains that are a heartbeat away from the green signal! But all can't be lucky, all the time, and the queues of hapless souls who've missed the trains could well be the index of Cal's chaos."

"Isn't it a mirror image of unrequited lovers?" she said reminiscently. "Either way that is."

"Well, nothing symbolizes Cal better than Kalighat I suppose" he continued with his account of the place. "I haven't seen a more chaotic place than the Kali temple there that's too small for the furious goddess, with that protruding tongue. Then the ritual of animal sacrifice, before the deity itself, in the precincts of the temple, and bless the goddess, how the leeches of the priests bleed the jostling crowds to the dreg what with heir knack to spot the gullible first-timers bordering on sorcery. By the time you're through with your perambulations, you find your wallet lighter for the assorted blessings you've had from them, at every corner of Her majestic pedestal. When you come out in the end, you would tend to think but for Her divine hand, the edifice of faith would've long crumbled at Her shrine itself."

"Won't all that give it a torrid look?"

"Well, try worshipping the sedate Kali in Her serene posture at Dakshineswar," he said, "and you may find you're far off from the devotional fervor that accounts for the religious faith. I felt if Kalighat is Cal, Belur Mutt across the Hooghly is some other world. That's not all, thanks to the red light area nearby; devotion and debauchery go hand in hand at Kalighat. Why can't I be frank with you? I used to go to a joint at the Free School

Street for a fling or two, well nothing free about it though, but the schooling was not bad there. I never ventured into Sonagachi, for I heard it was a crowded bazaar but once I felt like trying it out at a Kalighat brothel."

"Don't I know," she said winking at him, "what all you learnt in that Free School Street?"

"Mind you, it's still it's a learning curve," he said in smile, "and as I entered the zone that evening, I found it was all lit up. There were girls all over, decked up in the traditional attire. Though I sauntered up and down, as none came to solicit, I approached the best looking one, only to learn that being Karthika Purnima it was a day of abstinence for them. As bachelors form the bulk of their clientele, seems it was their custom to appease Karthik, the Bachelor God, without any indulgence that day. What an ingenious way to appease the demigod to further their trade."

"Oh, what to say of customs," she said in smile, "was it a wild goose chase then?"

"Why, I came across a beautiful transgressor," he said winking at her. "But there is more to it. Soon after we were alone, as there was a brawl outside, I wanted to lave, but she wanted me to stay as otherwise it amounts to paying for her for nothing. When I told her not to bother, she said it would matter to her if I don't make it with her and sensing that I didn't believe her, she told me she rarely gets to sleep with a decent man. Oh, what a lesson in love and life that was for me."

"Oh, how are these women supposed to fleece of their customers?" she asked.

"Not all of them as it seems," he said. "If Cal is formidable for its structural grandeur, it's the women who provide it its splendor. I may say Bengali women are apart with most of them being above average and any connoisseur of the fair sex would second my opinion. Like the statistical line of poverty, if ever an empirical line of beauty is devised, I'm sure you would find very few Bengali women below par. Maybe, it's the Bengali way of celebrating the charms of their women by centering all their festivities on various goddesses. Where else are Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Saraswati Puja celebrated with such pomp and pageantry?"

"Oh how lucky," she said mirthfully, "you weren't hooked by any!"

"Well, my ardency for the Bengali beauty was dampened by the domineering nature I noticed in many," he said. "But yet I couldn't take my eyes off them, especially during the times of Durga Puja. Nights come alive during those thirteen days while life ceases during the daytime. You should only see to believe Cal's infectious atmosphere during those days. It's as though no one stays at home during those nights. Millions are ever on the move from one *puja pandal* to the other till the wee hours. Once I got naughty and came out unscathed with the skin of my teeth. With my hand on Gopal's shoulder, I squeezed the breast of a teenaged beauty as I passed her by but as she cried foul and before the mob could react, I melted in the multitude. Well Gopal wasn't harmed as the girl didn't name him and joining me shortly thereafter, he told me I would've got lynched then and there but for my presence of mind."

"So from bottom pinching," she said naughtily, "you've graduated to bosom brushing and commuting by bus would've been handy."

"But once I tie the knot," he said heartily, "don't you think my hands would be tied as well? Well, in Cal, if you don't want to miss your bus to the office, you should be fighting fit, no matter your gender and age, you won't board a bus in Cal; you just barge into it that is against all odds. No quarter is asked or given even to the fair sex. They too have to go through the same grind, but once inside, courtesy beckons them at every turn with men offering them seats all over. Oh, what can you make of that?"

"Well, having taken the woman on board," she said in the lighter vein, "man knows it pays to keep her in good humor, doesn't he?"

"Don't I know you are naughty," he said enthusiastically, "but on the trams, one fares much better there, literally that is. It's a funny sight to see some pretending to be fast asleep as the conductor approaches them for the fare. Maybe, being wiser for his unpleasant experiences on earlier occasions, the conductor prefers not to disturb such. But once their destination is reached, these sleepy *bhadraloks* alight from it with alacrity. Oh, all this farce, when one can travel from one end to the other for a fare of eighteen paise! It appears communism doesn't confine itself to proletariat in Calcutta. It seems to be at work at all levels of its society. Doesn't the state own all property and isn't the state our very own? So the state property is people's own property and why should they pay for the services of what they own and it could as well be the reasoning of the Bengali intellect."

"What makes communism tick there?"

"It's not for nothing that communism is so well entrenched in Bengal's polity," he said, assuming the tone of a political pundit. "The philosophy of communism is but the credo of the Bengali: high on rhetoric and slow to takeoff. Could it be any different given the Bengali penchant for artistic excellence? What an artistic people these Bengalis are. Why should things mundane interest them at all? See the creative range of the *pandals* erected for Durga Puja and others, and you would get to know the brilliance of their ingenuous minds. After all, communism is all about each working according to his abilities and paid according to one's needs. What abilities can an illiterate possess and what more would the poor need than a plate of *mori* and a cup of *chai*, that together cost twenty-five paise. It's a different matter that the gentry feign asleep, on the trams, to save much less than that."

"What a city of contrasts the Cal is!"

"The contradictory ethos of the Calcuttans is no less puzzling," he said. "Even as they come out in numbers to mourn the death of a minor comrade, they all remain immune to the plight of the *rickshawala*, who doubles up for a mule. One evening, Gopal engaged a rickshaw though I felt odd about it. But after a short ride, to my great surprise, my conscience stopped troubling me, maybe, it's in communism to cast a shadow on the collective consciousness of the Calcuttans, and well the *rickshawalas* serve the needy, otherwise too, by pimping for the prostitutes. It's amusing to see them line up their rickshaws near the pavements at the Dharmatalla and ring their hand bells as a call for service."

"Maybe, once we taste the creature comforts," she said intuitively, "we turn insensitive to our fellow beings."

"Oh, dear, it's so like the Bengali articulation-- intellectually stimulating," he said in apparent admiration. "You would come across that at the coffee houses and the tea stalls alike. At the bars, however, it could all be bawdy as intoxication and articulation make a heady mix. Gopal was a little too fond of drink. On occasion, he used to drag me to a bar at the Jaggu Bazaar that he frequented. Once I met there a *marwari* businessman who was trying to rope me in ever since I began rejecting his supplies. Inebriated by then, he demanded that I tell him why not I favor him by taking a bribe? I told him that my income lets me a drink or two at a bar and a fling or two at some brothel, that too occasionally. And if I start compromising, I said, the easy money could bring me to the bar daily and might lead me to the whores regularly, injuring my health permanently and the Bengali, who overheard us, began articulating about the corruption of their culture by the *marwari* businessmen. And this led to a brawl naturally."

"Oh you, sensible as ever!" she said ruffling his hair and smelled her palm for Keo-Karpin.

"What a romantic reminder," he said exultantly, "but I used to feel sad at the Victoria Memorial, designed to uplift Cal's haggard souls. You may remember my friend Soni from my Ranchi days,"

"The *papaya* lover you mean."

"Not a bad memory," he said, "we met again in Cal and I used to go there with him once in a way. Finding couples all over cuddle around the tree trunks, I used to crave for some fun with Kala but as he was critical of those lovers once, I told him that it's all sour grapes, and that he would find the company of a lass far more preferable than mine, if only he could manage one."

"We shall make it to the Victoria Memorial," she said animatedly, "well before our lovers' tag starts getting faded. Why, we shall have our honeymoon in your Cal."

"Won't I love it," he said leaning over her shoulder.

"That is after Vasu gets his just deserts."

Chapter 27

Just Deserts

Soon they were at the Honeycomb to the hearty welcome of the Chandras.

"What a reunion," said Chandra hugging Sathya.

"What a pair you make!" Nithya couldn't hide her admiration.

"We owe it all to you!" Sathya addressed Chandra.

"I feel, we owe it to Nithya no less," said Prema, taking Nithya's hand.

"What a twist of destiny!" said Chandra with mixed feelings.

'Well, to push Vasu into the doghouse.' Nithya thought with satisfaction.

By the time they sat for dinner, the logistics to stop Vasu in his tracks were worked out.

After Vasu came back, it was agreed that Prema would stay at the Honeycomb till she got her divorce. Well, Sathya would be a welcome guest all the time. That way, Vasu couldn't cast any aspersions on Prema during the divorce proceedings. Besides, her presence would deter him from stalking Nithya. As Prema was averse to dealing with Vasu anymore, Nithya took it upon herself to deliver the missive penned by Prema for him. It was agreed that Nithya would invite Vasu to the Honeycomb, instead of her going to the Ritz, and deal with him appropriately. Well, Chandra and company would lie in wait just in case. Sathya, who was impressed by Nithya's spiritedness, thought that Vasu could've met his nemesis in her.

The D-day came two days later, and as expected, Vasu rang up Nithya, only to be led into her trap.

"If it were okay for you here," said Vasu in anticipation, as he came in, "why did you deny me all these days?"

"I called you for a different reason," said Nithya feigning nervousness.

"Enough of leading me up the garden path," said Vasu determinedly. "It's time I had you even if it comes to raping."

"You'll turn cold if you hear the news."

"Why, what happened?"

"Your letter has fallen into Chandra's hands and he's sore about us."

"Good riddance bad rubbish," he stated gleefully. "If he divorces you, my absurd proposal would no longer be absurd. Prema could take care of me and I'll maintain you."

"But sadly," she said affecting pity, "Prema chose to desert you to see you get your just deserts."

"What do you mean?"

"It's what Prema thinks that counts, isn't it?" she said as she handed him Prema's fatal missive.

Vasu,

When you first disclosed your love, I made it known to you that I loved Sathya. Having told me about his affection for his classmate, when you goaded me to break with him, I believed you acted out of your own love for me. Well, all is fair in love and war, I thought. But it was only after our marriage that I realized you eyed me only for my money. Had I not burnt my bridges with Sathya, I would've walked out on you then and there. So I stayed put in a cold storage of a marriage.

When I'd seen you flirting with Nithya, I didn't care, as we've no love lost between us. But when I saw your letter to her, shaming me, I could take it no more. If it was right for you to goad me to leave the man I loved because he slighted my love, you can't say it's wrong for me to leave the spouse who demeans me to curry the favor of another woman.

As I have decided to leave you, it's only proper you shouldn't have anything that would remind me of you. So I've given away to the needy all those goodies that my father gave us. Any day now you would get the summons from the court and it may be wise for you not to contest, for your letter of shame is in my possession.

I'm going in search of Sathya to make amends as best as I can. If I can't become his wife, it would still be honorable becoming his mistress. My only regret is I've dishonored myself by being your wife for so long!

Never Yours,

Prema.

'Oh God!' he collapsed, 'I'm ruined.'

"Be a man, Vasu," Nithya said tauntingly. "After all, being a woman, I didn't cry when you left me in the lurch then. But, there's still hope for you. If Chandra chooses to leave me, I may still come to you, of course, along with his child in my womb. You can have it as a bonus, won't you? Moreover, there would be no need to spend on abortion as it's no shame conceiving in marriage. Isn't it?"

"Oh stop it," said Vasu in exasperation. "Now it's clear, you planned it all and took your revenge. You'd induced me to write that letter to use it for my ruin. You prompted me for our family friendship to turn Prema against me. Oh, how you poisoned her mind. You bitch!"

"Mind your language, Mister!" said Nithya contemptuously, "and then stop blaming me. Why, I was indifferent to you when we met again and I snubbed you when you came to my place to cajole me and yet you coveted me, didn't you? Oh, how you had

hinted at blackmailing me! You thought I would chicken out and come to sleep with you, didn't you? Fool, did I ask you to write that your wife is cold? As you sow, so you reap, you better realize that?"

Vasu got up to leave.

"Blame it upon your attitude towards women," she said as he crossed the threshold of her house. "Blame it upon your lack of character. Blame it upon your mean nature."

"It pays to know that our nature is our fate." Nithya said, slamming the door after him.