



EILYAH

A Novel

Umme Pritam

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Cover art by Sabby Zaman

Advisor: Amitabh Dewry

Advisor: Muzdalif Ahmed Razon

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Maa, this one's for you

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1

Home

“E llie! Dinner is ready. Come down now,” my mom called from downstairs while I was busy stargazing, laying on the hard concrete rooftop with my hand tucked under my head. The electricity was out. It was back in 2004, when load shedding was quite common in Dhaka city. Every day, electricity would go out at the same hour of night.

“Dhaka City has become a shithole,” my father had said the other day. “All those people at the electric plant... who are they to decide when to cut the power?”

It struck nine in the clock when all the lights in the neighborhood had been shut off. The children from all around used to cheer, since it meant no studying for the time being. Some came out on the street, some went over the rooftop and played games, or simply watched the night sky as I used to do. It was my favorite pastime as an eight-year-old.

“But now it doesn’t happen–The load shedding,” Sarah interrupts.

“No, it doesn’t. It’s the year 2039. Bangladesh has come a long way since then,” I reply.

“Yeah, we play video games now in our free time.”

“We also had video games back then, but not in our house.”

“Did you want to play it?” She asks.

I shrug. “No. Nothing like that. I loved watching cartoons and taking photos.”

She nods. “Okay Maa, go on.”

I smile at her. “Sure.”

As I got up to head down to dinner, Doggo rushed to me, wagging his tail. I had found him four months ago in an alley in our neighbourhood, his right leg was seriously injured. Some children from the street were kicking him in the back. I rushed to him, driving the children away, and knelt before him, placing his soft little head on my lap. But at the sight of his pleading black eyes, I knew what I had to do with him. I refused to move from his side, so my mother allowed me to take him home on one condition—I had to feed him, bathe him, potty train him, the entire work. I agreed without thinking twice, though I was only eight and did not know how to raise a dog.

Ever since then, he’d been living with us, though it irked my father a lot. Baba even had threatened several times that he would put him in a sack and take him far away from here. He hated dogs. He hated everything with a heartbeat. And I topped the list.

“I’m so sorry Maa. But my father loves me a lot!” Sarah says.

I smile. “Yes, he does. More than anything in the world.”

Suddenly, a squeal from the orphanage building next door caught my attention. Some boys were playing on its rooftop. I knew a few of them—

Farhan, Russel, and Arif. But my eyes were fixed on a new boy who was standing aside, far from the others, leaning against a pillar. He's the only one not playing, rather just watching them. I had never seen him before. That was his first day here. And I immediately felt bad for him. My mom told me that children who don't have parents come to the orphanage. I didn't know how those children live without their parents—I couldn't imagine a day without my mom.

Jolted from my thoughts, I noticed him staring back at me. God, had I ever seen a more devastating pair of eyes than his? The sadness there was so harrowing it could drown all the people in the neighbourhood. I felt the overwhelming desire to walk up to him and say, "Hey, whatever it is that's breaking you, it will go away. Because my mom said, God can see everything, and he loves his creations more than even the mother; thus he eases the pain." As we held our gazes, my feet subconsciously drifted to the edge of the rooftop. Doggo followed closely behind. I stopped as soon as I got close. The boy, too, moved from where he was standing and halted at the railing.

We said nothing immediately. I smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. From there, I could see his eyes clearly: deep and brown. Dried tear streaks trailed down his cheeks to his chin. He probably cried a lot that day.

"What's your name?" I asked him. Doggo looked at him and gave a friendly yip.

His gaze dropped to Doggo, then he looked back up at me again. "Hussain."

Mom called me again. I couldn't talk to him further. "Talk to you later," saying that I rushed downstairs.

That night, Mom made my favourite dish—spaghetti. The entire house was heavy with the pleasant aroma of tomato sauce and cheese.

After dinner, I brushed my teeth, changed into my pajamas, and combed my hair.

Stepping out of the washroom, I saw Mom had already spread my quilt across my bed, Mr. Dino lying atop it. Mr. Dino was my green woolen with the red tongue dinosaur: my other best friend.

As I slipped under the quilt and squeezed Mr. Dino to my chest, my mom came inside. She wiggled under the quilt with me.

“Whoa! My Ellie’s tummy is fluffy today? Maybe because Mommy made her favorite dish.” She rubbed her hand over my tummy, tickling me. I giggled.

She pulled me toward her and brushed her fingers through my hair.

“Mom?” I pressed my face against her chest.

“Yes, my princess?”

“You love me a lot?” I asked her because I couldn’t erase that boy’s sad eyes from my mind—Hussain.

Pulling me closer, Mom placed a kiss on my forehead. “I love you more than anything in the world.”

“All moms love their children more than anything in the world?”

“Yes.” She said.

“Then why do they hurt their children by dying, Mom?” Suddenly I felt mad at all the mothers who had died, leaving their children alone in the world.

Stroking a strand of my hair, Mom said, “You know what mothers want?”

“What?”

She looked deep into my eyes. “They fear the day they have to leave their children behind. They are most scared of death because they know no one will love their babies as much as they do.”

“Then why?”

“Because we all have to die one day, Ellie, even if we don’t want to. You can’t hide from it. This is God’s will, which we cannot break.”

I was then mad at God. But as I couldn’t really see him, I couldn’t really ask him directly why he needed to do it. Taking moms away from their babies? I sighed and grabbed my mom tight.

Mom laughed. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I saw a new boy at the orphanage today. His name is Hussain. He was so sad.”

Her face turned sad. “May God make it easier for Hussain.”

Holding my mom tight, I kept thinking, that nothing could ever be more painful than not having your mother around.

October 2018:

I’m leaving for my father’s house. Call me after work. I hesitate a little before pressing the send button. It itches my mind a lot, shooting Aryan texts nowadays, as he almost never replies back.

Slipping the phone inside my pocket, I look around my bedroom one last time, saying goodbye to my cozy place.

I clutch the small photo frame of my mother and me in my palms. My eight-year-old self is looking at my mother in absolute awe. She was so

beautiful.

How do people cope with this hollowness? It's been eight weeks since I last saw her, and it dawns on me that I never will again. She is not around and she is never going to be. But she had me, and I had her. Now I'm here, standing alone, desperately needing to snatch her away from somewhere. But I can't, can I? Death is the only inevitable thing out there.

"Ellie!" Aunt Trisha steps inside the room and hugs me tight.

"You know, you don't have to stay with your dad. You can live with us." She cups my cheeks in her palms.

I smile. "You have done more than enough for us already, and he is my father. I should stay with him."

After the divorce from my father, my mom rented the flat next to my aunt's.

When my mother fell sick two years ago, Aunt Trisha and Areeba, my cousin, did so much to help with household chores and care for Mom. They did more for us than we could ever repay, and I don't want to burden them anymore. Although, after all these years, it'll feel strange to live with my father.

"But we are always there for you. Remember that," says Aunt Trisha.

"Of course."

I take my purse and head to the front door.

My father's car is parked outside the apartment building.

"Shall we?" Baba asks as soon as I climb inside. I look at the buildings and streets I once lived and played in one last time.

"Let's go." I wave at my aunt and Areeba who see me off from the gate.

Are you sure you'll be alright? A text message from Areeba pops up on my phone screen as soon as I lose sight of them. I can picture her worried face in my head. Though she's only a year older than me, Areeba practically plays the role of a big sister.

I miss you guys already. I'll call you as soon as I get there, I type back.

This is life, isn't it? We cope with a terrifying situation by replacing it with something even more terrifying.

I've lost my mother, and nothing more hurtful can outrun it. So yes, I'm going to cope.

This is my first time at my father's new house. He bought this house in Dhanmondi less than two weeks ago. I used to come and meet my father in his old apartment before my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Later, I became too busy between caring for her, my university classes, and running errands.

We wait in the car in front of the old-fashioned, two-story house. A tall black iron gate separates the red brick house and the expansive lawn from the street. I heard it cost him a fortune buying this house in this neighbourhood, but as a lawyer, Baba afforded it easily.

As I'm busy checking the new street I'm going to live in, I catch someone staring at me from the house next to my father's house. It's a guy, folding his arms across his chest, standing on his balcony—watching us intently.

I throw him a nervous smile. He doesn't smile back, rather he frowns?

Okay, whatever. He might be as well in a bad mood as I am now. I move my eyes back to the gate.

Baba waves at a middle-aged man who exits the gatehouse. He starts sliding back the gate, allowing us in. On the right-hand side, there is a garage fit for two cars, which my father aims for. The man rushes to my side of the car and opens it once Baba turns off the engine. I step out of the car and smile at him.

He then walks around the car and starts unloading my belongings from the trunk. As I reach for one of my suitcases, Baba steps out and says, “Ellie, leave it here. Bokul will take these things inside the house and put them in your room.”

I nod at him. We head down a stone walkway that weaves through the lawn to the front of the house. Aunt Rubina, my father’s elder sister, stands by the front door. She moved into this new house with my father. Aunt Rubina looks just like him: tall, slender, with sharp features. I haven’t seen her in the last nine years. She used to resent my mother and lumped me in with that hatred, so I never got a call or visit from her. But she hugs me as soon as I reach her. “Come here, Ellie!”

My body stiffens as I hug her back with a smile plastered on my face. I can pretend well, too; it runs in the family.

She places her hand around my arm, and together, we walk through the entryway into the living room. “Come inside, you need to eat. You’ve gotten thinner since the last time I saw you,” she says.

I chuckle. I’m twenty-one now and the last time she saw me I was eleven, pretty much a child.

The house is quite dark. No lights are turned on, except the one glowing from the other side of the house.

We pass through a corridor that leads us to the dining hall, the source of the light. A huge eight-chair table sits in the centre, and a wall cabinet containing ceramic dishes hugs the wall. A gaudy crystal chandelier hangs above me.

I wrinkle my nose. As far as my eyes go, I only see excessive grandeur — a huge staircase that I can't see the top of from here, a heavily equipped kitchen with two dishwashers, gold, and black flower embossed wallpaper. Everything is in this house, exactly the opposite of my mother's flat. My mom used to hate flashy things. I inherited that from her.

“Do you want to freshen up first, then have dinner?” Baba asks me.

“Yes, that'd be better.”

“Apa!” He turns to Aunt Rubina. “Show Ellie her bedroom.”

I follow Aunt Rubina up the staircase.

“Your bedroom is the last one here,” Aunt Rubina explains as we arrive at a door at the end of the hallway. We stop in front of the door as she unlocks it and swings it open for me.

My mouth drops open at the sheer *size* of it. Lilac floral wallpaper covers every wall. Everything in this room is lilac—the bedsheet, the curtain, the rug. How does my father still remember that lilac is my favourite colour? He showed minimal interest in my life. Whatever. At least it looks comfy.

“You like the room?” Aunt Rubina asks me.

“Yeah, it's all right,” I tell her, maintaining a straight face. I do that a lot, keeping a straight face. It confuses people, but their puzzled looks

amuse me.

“Your suitcases are beside the closet. Freshen up and then I’ll set the table.” She leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

As soon as she leaves, I head out onto the terrace. Two patio chairs have been set around a small tea table. It’s immediately my favorite place in this huge house. The lawn, the main gate, the street, and everything beyond can be seen from here like trees and tiny lights twinkling on the edge of the buildings. The vast sky stretches above. I stand there and try to take it all in. I put my elbow on the railing and lean forward to look over the street. It’s empty. No cars or pedestrians. Good for me. I like silence more than crowds.

Here, I start a completely different life. With this new house, with a new room, with my father and his sister. My chest aches thinking about the life I had like I have severed a tie with someone I loved with all my heart.

Is it called desolation? Thinking about the word reminds me of my boyfriend, Aryan. I unlock my phone, and there are only two unread text messages from Areeba. Earlier, it used to irritate me, his lack of communication sometimes, but now I’m immune to it. He must be busy. I’ll just text him goodnight and sleep over it.

As I open the bathroom door, I feel like I’m inside someone else’s bathroom and sneaking around.

My phone chimes in my hand. Areeba’s text flashes on the screen. *Did you make it? How’s it going?*

I type back, *I’m a rich girl now who has a bathtub in her bathroom.*

Whoa! Happy bathing.

Deciding to take a shower instead, I take out some clothes from my suitcase and hang them on the clothing rack.

As soon as I'm out of the shower, I cover my head with a big scarf, ready to start my nightly prayer. I pull aside all of the curtains from the windows to welcome in the fresh air. The room is too stuffy otherwise. Even though the room comes equipped with an air conditioner, I'm not ready to indulge myself in that luxury yet.

I spread the prayer mat on the floor and stand on it to pray. As I'm about to start the prayer, a strange feeling settles beneath my skin, like someone is watching me. Maybe from the open window behind me? Though I try to ignore it, something nags at me to check. I need my prayer to be deep and smooth.

I turn and find I'm right. It's a guy from the next door's window. I'm sure it's the same guy who was staring at me from his balcony a while ago. My new grumpy neighbour.

There's only about a ten-foot gap between this house and the neighbouring house. One of his hands holds the windowsill and the other deftly holds a cigarette. I can't see his face properly because of the shadows, but I can tell he is tall, at least six feet, with a lean body and wide shoulders. He takes a drag from the cigarette.

"Why are you watching me?" I ask him. My sudden question seems to startle him. "Can't you see I'm praying?" I ask again in a slightly sharper voice.

He stubs the cigarette against the sill of the window and says, "Sorry, I just came out. You can draw the drapes. I won't mind."

He's right. I could draw the curtain. It's his house, his room, and he was smoking beside his window. But somehow, the reply infuriates me. I don't know if it's the stress from the day, this garish house, or the fact that my boyfriend *still* hasn't texted.

I nod at him. “I need to pray,” I say, suppressing a sudden flood of anger.

He nods and steps away from the window, but I draw the curtains back together, anyway.

I take a seat at the edge of the dining table. My father grabs the seat across from me while Aunt Rubina serves chicken biryani and kebab. The smell makes my stomach growl and reminds me that I haven’t eaten since morning. Aunt Rubina sets a plate full of biryani in front of me and I start devouring it, ignoring the fact that none of them has started eating yet.

“So, what about university? When are you going to your class again?” Baba asks me, taking a kebab from the serving dish.

“I’ve dropped the semester,” I reply casually, chewing a piece of chicken.

He stops eating and looks at me. “You didn’t inform me of that.”

“No, because it happened yesterday.”

He shakes his head, probably considering my recent circumstances. “Let me know if you need anything and take your time. Start your semester whenever you feel like it.”

I don’t say anything, instead, continue to chew my food. He has never cared for how I felt and never stopped pushing me hard to study. This new change in his behaviour is surprising.

“And another thing, Ellie. Let me know the payment date of next semester’s fees,” he says.

I’m about to laugh, but I stop myself in time. My tuition fees have long been taken care of. My mom used to work, and she earned enough for both

of us. She never asked for child support or any kind of assistance from my father, except for my custody. Surprisingly, my father had tried to fight for my custody in court, but they finally gave it to my mother.

Clearing my throat, I say, "Don't be bothered about it. Mom left some savings for me. Payments will be drawn from there."

My father watches me for a moment. "Whatever your mom has left for you, leave it as it is. I've always wanted to pay for your fees and other expenses, but she never took it from me." He pauses before saying again, "I don't know what kind of thoughts she instigated in you, but I'll always be here for you as long as I'm alive."

This time, I can't control myself. I laugh, leaving both my father and my aunt startled by my behaviour.

"Why are you laughing?" Aunt Rubina asks, clearly annoyed.

But I'm still laughing, so I don't reply immediately. After I'm done with my amusement, I take a sip from the glass, then say, "Baba, Mom never manipulated me against you. She reminded me all the time that you loved me and to respect you. So don't blame her for the damage you have done to me."

"How long would you hold a grudge against me, Ellie?"

"I'm not holding anything against you, Baba. It's just too late. And don't think I came here to live because suddenly I expect anything from you. I came here just because you are my father and I should live here rather than living elsewhere."

Baba says nothing. His face has flushed a deep shade of red. He remains quiet as he pushes away his food and stands, heading upstairs. Aunt Rubina throws me an irritated look. "You didn't have to do that, Ellie."

I don't reply to her. Aunt Rubina huffs and storms into the kitchen. She says something to a woman working inside.

My phone starts ringing. Areeba. I cancel her call, resolving to call her once I go back to my room. Once I'm done with my dinner, I stand and grab my plates. The woman from the kitchen rushes toward me and takes the plates away. "Give it to me, madam. I'll wash it."

I nod. Handing over the plates, I head upstairs.

"Everything feels lilac here," I reply to Areeba's question about how my new room feels. I called her back as soon as I retreated to my room, knowing that she could easily jam my phone with a flood of incoming texts.

"Well, at least your father has made an effort to please you."

I smirk. "Yeah, a lot of effort!"

She sighs. "I know... Oh, listen, you asked me to remind you to call Forhad tomorrow."

"Yeah, it's been a long since I last talked to him."

"And give me a video call tomorrow as well. I want to see your new home."

"I will, promise. But right now, I just need to sleep like a dead person."

"Yeah, yeah, I won't hold you any longer, but don't show Aryan your new room before showing it to me first. Keep that in mind."

I let out a sigh. "He didn't even text me the whole day, let alone call, so I'm pretty sure you'll be the first one to see it."

Areeba goes silent for a moment. "Why don't you get it, Ellie?"

"Please don't start again." I squeeze my throbbing forehead with my fingers. Stupid migraine.

“No, I’m not starting anything again. You just refuse to see it. He doesn’t treat you well.”

Sensing the impending argument, I tell her, “Areeba, I promise I’ll talk to you about it first thing in the morning, but now I need to hang up. I have a migraine.”

“Now you are having a migraine?” Annoyance laces her voice; she doesn’t believe me. She ends the call.

I turn on the bedside lamp and switch off the main light in the room. I have a fear of darkness and never spent a moment in complete darkness. I always leave a light on, even when I am sleeping.

I climb into bed and lie down.

I suddenly feel strange and lonelier in this new room, where nothing belongs to me. Nothing feels like home here. I try to ease the heavy weight in my chest by breathing slowly. I close my eyes, willing myself to sleep. Hopefully, it’s not like other nights where, no matter how tired and exhausted I am, my body refuses to shut down.

I clutch my side pillow tightly to my chest and start counting back from thirty. Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven, twenty-six, twenty-five...

“Ellie, do you want to have ice cream?” The man asks me. I can’t clearly see his face as he is standing in the shadows, though his voice sounds familiar. Everything around me seems hazy. But I think I’m in a park, a children’s park.

“Yes I do,” I leap up in excitement.

“Let’s go then,” the man extends his hand towards me, and I hold it.

Suddenly I find myself on the lap of that man. He is smiling at me and pinching my cheeks. We are sitting on a boat, in the middle of a river, and

it's getting darker around. The sky upon us is overcast. It's going to rain soon now.

I see a reflection in the water—a little girl is staring back at me. I know these eyes—these big brown eyes. Those eyes belong to me. The boat rocks and I feel something beneath my thigh.

The man whispers in my ears, “Do you like it, Ellie? You won't tell anyone about it, will you? You are a sweet little girl who loves me so much, don't you?”

I shake my head. I will not tell a single soul.

I jolt up in my bed. Rubbing my eyes, I look upward and release a sigh of relief. It's the ceiling, not that overcast sky, and I'm not on a boat.

It's back from the stress—the nightmare. Nothing else. I tell myself.

With a shaky hand, I pour a glass of water from the jug kept on the nightstand. I empty the glass in a gulp. I inhale a long breath to soothe myself. But my heart doesn't stop racing. It's been a long time since I haven't had this nightmare. I thought it was gone. And now, it's back again.

I won't sleep tonight. Rather, I would keep my eyes wide open. I can't let that nightmare haunt me again

Stranger

I looked back, hearing the boys fighting on the other side of the fence. They were playing football in the orphanage yard. It was all cheery and festive a moment ago. To know what happened suddenly, putting Mr. Dino aside, I ran over to the fence.

Stopping by the fence, I saw some boys pushing Hussain and scolding him for something. This was the first time Hussain had taken part in a cricket match since he came here. I was happy to see him playing with others that day.

He usually used to stand aside and watch others playing. I knew as he was new, it's taking time for him to get along with them. I saw him several nights on the rooftop. He was always on his own, in a corner, lost in his thoughts.

Looking at the crowd, I was trying to understand what the tiff was about.

“Hey, Amit!” I called out a boy I know from the orphanage. He was also present there.

Noticing me waving my hand at him, Amit came near the fence. "What?" He said.

"Why are they scolding Hussain?" I asked him.

Rolling his eyes, he replied, "Because he missed a catch, the ball slipped out of his hand. It was the last over!"

"You guys are shoving him for missing a catch?"

A boy far older than us and twice in size than Hussain from the crowd had already hit him. I knew this boy. He always acted like the big baddie. He was always the one who used to start a fight.

At this point Sarah gasps. "I know this type of boy. We had one in our class when we were in elementary school. You know him, Maa. Saif."

I nod. "Yeah, I can clearly remember him. How is he now? The same?"

Sarah shakes her head. "No. He is not. He has changed a lot. Now, he is one of the soberest teenagers in our class."

I laugh. "People change. Some turn worse and some better."

"What about that boy? Did he become better?" asks Sarah.

"Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to see his transition," I reply.

"Why?"

I sigh. "You need to hear the rest of the story to know that."

She nods, "Okay. Continue."

The boy suddenly threw a punch at Hussain's face and then kicked his leg. Wincing in pain, Hussain dropped to his knees. As the boy raised his hand to gut him on his shoulder, I couldn't bear to let it happen. I spoke out, "Hey! Stop hitting him."

Hearing me, the boy looked up at me, then a devilish smile escaped his mouth. He then did what he was going to do. He gutted Hussain on his

shoulder with full force. Hussain was crouched on his knees. He tripped over on the ground, screaming.

I climbed over the fence, pushing the crowd away. I walked directly to the boy who hit Hussain a few seconds ago. He grinned at me. The devilish grin. The— ‘Hey look I hit him though you asked me not to’ grin. Irrked by his disgusting smirk which was flashing through his yellow dirty teeth, I swung my hand and slapped him, which left the crowd gasping. Everything fell quiet suddenly.

Startled by my sudden move, the boy said nothing immediately. Rather, his hand went upon his cheek. I didn’t wait for his reaction. Turning around, I knelt down before Hussain, who was eyeing me with a stunned look on his face. Placing my hand over his shoulder, motioning at his bloody knees, I said to him, “You are hurt. Come with me.”

He didn’t move. Rather, he kept watching me with disbelief.

“I’m not gonna hurt you. I know how to put on a bandaid. Let me help you,” hearing me, he nodded.

With my help, leaning on my shoulder, he rose from the ground and stood up. As we were about to leave the courtyard, the boy yelled from behind, “I will tell your mom that you slapped me!”

Without looking behind me, I replied, “Good. She will make sure that I break your leg next time.”

Doggo was resting on the couch in the living room. He leapt up and rushed to us as we stepped inside through the front door.

He welcomed Hussain with soft bark. Hussain returned the bark with a half-smile. He then sat down on the couch.

“You wait here, I’m coming back with the bandaid,” I then rushed to my parent’s room, going through the drawer of the nightstand, I found the first

aid box.

I got back into the living room with the first aid box in my hand. Sitting down beside Hussain, I opened the box and took out a savlon and a cotton ball. Dripping some savlon water on the cotton, I then started cleaning the place on the knee where he had been hurt. "It's gonna sting," I said, rubbing the bruise.

He nodded, "It's fine." Though his face grimaced from the sting.

"Why can't they make a savlon which won't sting? I hate it. Why hurt the place more while it's already hurting?" I scoffed.

He chuckled.

After cleaning the bruise, I put a band-aid over it. "It's done," I said, grinning. I was proud that I had successfully accomplished it.

Looking at me, he smiled, "Thank you."

"You are welcome. But why didn't you punch him back?" I asked him. It was scratching my mind for a while.

"I don't like fighting with people," he replied.

I frowned, "Neither do I. But I'll hit back if someone does that to me." I said, pointing at his face. His face was all red and swollen. Doggo barked softly, agreeing with me. I scooped him from the floor and set him on my lap.

"What's your name?" He finally asked me.

"Eiliyah. But everyone calls me Ellie. You can also call me Ellie. I won't mind."

"Eiliyah," he murmured. "Ellie."

I nodded. "Do you have any nickname like mine?"

"No," Hussain said, shaking his head. "Is he your dog?" he asked, motioning to Doggo. Doggo straightened his head up as Hussain pointed at

him. He used to do that whenever someone pointed at him, called him, or talked about him. He was a dog, but he was a lot smarter than he seemed. One day my school friend Naisa came over and was talking rubbish about Doggo in front of him. He had understood every garbage that came out of her mouth. Since then, he used to bark at her whenever she came over.

“Yeah. He is Doggo. He is the best dog in the world,” I said.

Hussain smiled for the first time since I had seen him. He looked beautiful smiling, his eyes brightened up, the gloom on his face dropped.

“You extend your hand to him for a shake. He will take it,” I said, winking at him. He looked at me first hesitantly, then extended his hand toward Doggo. Amusement set in his eyes as Doggo also raised his front leg in a handshake.

I clapped up in excitement. “See! He is smart.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Wait here. I want you to meet Mr. Dino.” I stood up and rushed outside to the front yard where Mr. Dino was bathing in the sun peacefully before I snatched him up from the ground and ran inside again.

“This is Mr. Dino. My other best friend.” I said, raising Mr. Dino before Hussain. He smiled again.

“Who is your best friend?” I asked him.

“I don’t have any,” he replied.

I sighed. This boy, having no parents and best friends, made me feel sadder for him. You need at least one best friend in your life.

“I can be your best friend,” I said, looking at my feet. Then I looked at him again, hoping for an answer. I found him smiling, his eyes gleaming. A grin formed on my lips from ear to ear, because I was successful in making this sad boy smile thrice. I reached my hand out to him. Instead of shaking

it, he glided his fingers through mine, holding up my hand in the air, like a high five. I smiled and said, "We are best friends now." Doggo barked again in approval. We both laughed out, looking at him.

"Do you want to eat something? My mom's at work. If she were here, she would have made you spaghetti. She makes the best spaghetti. Though our maid makes good sandwiches," she used to cook sometimes when mom was in the office.

"I'm not hungry," Hussain said. Then he looked around our living room and his eyes landed on the bookshelf beside the TV stand. Mom loved to read. She always kept buying books.

"Do you read books?" He asked me.

I shook my head.

"I love books. My favourite is Peter Pan," he said, pointing at a book kept on the bookshelf. "The story is really nice. You can read it and let me know if you liked it."

"Okay. I will."

"I enjoy reading a lot," he said. "It's like you are in some other place, you know."

"I enjoy taking photos with a camera," saying that my eyes gleamed up. "My aunt Trisha taught me how to take photos. I have clicked many since then. Do you want to see some of them?" Without waiting for his reply, I ran into my parent's bedroom again and came back with a photo album and my mom's camera.

I then flipped open the album and showed him a photo of my mom and Aunt Trisha. They were sitting in front of the parliament house. Then I showed him another photo. It's a photo of Aunt Trisha with Areeba. I

showed him a photo of Doggo as well. He was watching TV when I clicked it.

“I clicked these. I want to be a photographer, growing up. What do you want to be?” I asked him.

Thinking of something, he shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You can be a reader.”

Nodding, he said, “Maybe.”

“Ellie! Let’s go to the park. It’s five on the clock,” Nirjhor Bhai said, entering the room. He was sleeping inside. Nirjhor Bhai was my cousin. Aunt Rubina’s son. He used to study at a university in Dhaka, so he lived with us. I liked him a lot. Together, we used to go for a walk every day in the afternoon. Mom asked him to take me outside sometimes. He taught me how to play board games as well. Nirjhor Bhai even used to come to the rescue of my father’s beatings.

Checking the time on the wall clock, Hussain said, “I should go now. Thank you Ellie, for helping me today.”

“One second,” I said. “This was your first day here in our house. So, before you leave, I want to take a photo of you, Doggo, and Mr. Dino together. All my best friends in one photo,” I then picked up the camera from the couch which I brought with me from my parent’s room.

“Whoa! New best friend?” Nirjhor Bhai laughed.

I nodded, smiling.

“Hussain, ready?”

“Yes,” saying that he scooted closer to Doggo and took Mr. Dino on his lap. He was all set to be clicked.

I then took a few steps backward and brought the camera to my eyes. Setting the focus, I said, “Give me a big smile.”

He grinned, and I clicked the shutter—capturing all my best friends in one frame.

October 2018:

I'm tying my shoelace, standing in front of our gate, getting ready for my morning walk. As I step into the street, I don't see anyone around. It's 6:00 in the morning and the whole neighborhood is still asleep. If it was an area with lots of children like my older neighbourhood, the streets would be flooded with private cars, rickshaws, and school buses by now, the same destination for all— schools.

After jogging for twenty minutes straight, I stop to catch my breath. From where I'm standing and panting, I see a glimpse of a bookstore around the corner of the street.

A BOOKSTORE!

My eyes widen now. I love books. I can spend a whole day simply by stuffing my face inside a book.

I walk to the store. It looks more like an antique shop from outside. I try to see through the window, but all the windows are shut and blinds are drawn. As I see the door is ajar, I can't decide whether or not to go inside. Well, if there is a bookstore right in front of me and I don't step in right away, it will hurt my feelings.

I step in pushing the door slowly. I don't really see anyone, but a smell of freshly brewed coffee is in the air. The lights are turned on inside the

store. The shelves are ceiling-high stacked with thousands of books. The arrangement inside is more like a small library with woolen couches around some tea tables and floor lamps. The floor is covered with a thick red carpet. Besides the bookshelves and the cash counter, I see a coffee machine around the corner.

“I’m sorry the shop is not open yet.” I jolt and turn around to see the owner of the voice. I must say, I’m quite taken aback by the appearance of the guy standing in front of me, holding a cup of coffee in his hand—he is tall, lean, has a slightly bearded, strong jawline, head full of blackish hair but not totally black. As a ray of sunlight falls on his face, he looks beautiful. He doesn’t just *look* beautiful, he *is* beautiful... And I have seen him somewhere, but my foggy memory can’t recall it.

I don’t know what he sees on my face, he smiles, “Hey.”

“Hi,” I reply in a not-so-sure voice, but now I get it, where have I seen him! Last night, the guy from the window. It’s him. My neighbor. As I couldn’t see his face clearly the night before, I couldn’t recognize him right away. But he recognizes me, his smile says it.

I don’t know why I’m feeling so embarrassed right now. Is it the weird way I reacted to him last night?

Or does it make it a completely bizarre situation that the guy from the window is in the bookshop now? Should I say sorry to him or leave it as it is. I shouldn’t. It was not my fault either that he was looking at me. Besides, he frowned when I smiled at him.

“So, you are a reader too?” He asks me while taking a sip from his coffee cup.

“Yes, I am. But what do you mean?” What does he mean by *too*?

“You pray, you wake up before sunrise. You like to see the sunrise I guess? You also like to have your coffee while enjoying the morning view from your terrace, and now you have shown up in this bookstore at this hour of the morning- I hope this pretty much sums up the *too* part if you are wondering what I meant by that,” he is grinning mischievously.

My jaw drops a bit from the reply I just heard. Is he watching my every move? He laughs out loud at seeing me being suspicious and uncomfortable, “Hey, don’t worry, I’m not your creepy next-door neighbor who watches you secretly. It’s just that there was no one before you *as the* next-door neighbor for years now. The room you live in has always been empty, so I never minded having a smoke next to the window.”

I still feel uncomfortable, “If you were not watching me secretly, how come I have never seen you watching me in the first place?” I throw him a sharp look, trying to make *him* feel nervous.

But he is not. Rather, he lets out a sigh slowly, takes a step forward, and looks me into my eyes, “I was on my balcony while you were on your terrace watching the sunrise and...,” he pauses, “... wiping tears from your eyes. So, no, you didn’t notice me. You were not supposed to, I guess.”

Hearing him, I nod slowly. Now his words make sense. I really was crying this morning and every morning since my mother died. We used to pray together at that early hour of the dawn but now I do it alone.

“If I made you upset, I’m really sorry,” he says. I look up at him and notice the sincerity in his eyes.

“No, it’s fine. I am the one who was overreacting. I’m sorry. Actually, my mom died eight weeks ago and I came here yesterday to live with my father with whom I have zero bonding at this point and suddenly it’s a lot to take in— my father, his sister then this strange new house, on top of that the

person I love doesn't even care what situation I'm in right now..." I stop. I have no idea why I have just blabbered out so much information about my life to a complete stranger. I bite my lip, I do it when I'm nervous and right now I AM. I can feel my face has gone all red. I look up at him again and he is no longer grinning, that mischievous look has completely vanished from his eyes, and a concerned, softer gaze sets in there.

"It's okay," he nods, "Please have a seat here." He walks me over to one of the couches, "I'll be back in a minute." He disappears behind a bookshelf and comes back with a cup of coffee in his other hand. "Have it. Coffee makes everything a little better," he smiles as he hands over the cup to me. "I'm Raiyan by the way," he says.

"Eiliyah." I finally introduce myself.

"Eiliyah..." he mutters my name as he keeps watching me, "It's beautiful. Is it Spanish?" he asks.

"No, it's an Arabic name." I take a sip from the cup. The coffee tastes good.

"What does it mean?"

"High-born in the eye of God."

"Uh-huh..." He pauses for a moment, then says, "I'm really sorry to hear about your mother. Was she sick?"

I shake my head, "Yeah, she was a cancer patient."

"I see," he nods.

"Is this shop yours?" I ask him, looking around the store.

"Technically yes. But it's born out of the passion of my grandfather. He bought this piece of land and built this store here after his retirement. It was his dream to own a bookstore where people will have a chance to grab a

coffee and read as well. So here it is- the birth of Book Nook.” He puts down the cup on the table in front of us.

“And you look after it, the bookstore?”

“Yeah, most of the time. Besides my university classes. Like today, we are arranging a book signing event for this famous author, that’s the reason I’ve started working extra early. The staff will be here within twenty minutes,” he says looking at his wristwatch.

“That’s really great! Which author, by the way?” Now I’m really intrigued. I have never been to a book signing before. Book signing event? I have never even seen an author in real life.

“Ayaaz Abdullah,” he replies.

Did I hear him correctly? Ayaaz Abdullah is the most popular thriller writer in our country. You can’t just put down his book after reading the first page. I love his writing.

“How did you manage him to come here, it’s such a small bookstore?” I immediately regret my question, it came out wrong and sounded rude, “I am sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He doesn’t seem to be bothered about my blunt query, “It’s fine. He happens to be my uncle. My mother’s brother.” He grins. I like his smile already or when he smiles like this. His eyes also smile when he grins.

“You are such a lucky man Raiyan! You are not joking?” I don’t believe him immediately.

He chuckles, “No. come over this evening and find it out yourself.”

Did he just invite me? “So, I’m invited? Is there any registration or appointment that I have to do first?”

“Come on Eiliyah, you are my new next-door neighbour, be my guest,” he grins again.

I'm proud of myself. I have been in this neighborhood it's not even twenty-four hours, and I have accomplished an invitation to my favorite author's book signing event? You gotta be kidding me. No one will believe it. Areeba won't believe me, Aryan will probably think I'm dreaming. Thinking about Aryan makes me mad this time. He has vanished again. I let out a sigh and Raiyan catches it immediately, "What's the matter?" he asks me.

But no, I have decided to not be so overwhelming on this poor guy by sharing more upsetting things about my life. He is still a stranger.

"Nothing," I smile and slowly rise from the couch. He gets up too.

His phone suddenly starts ringing. Looking at the screen, his brows furrow. "Excuse me. I need to take it. Wait a minute."

I nod. "Sure."

He then disappears behind a bookshelf. "Why the hell did you call me?"

Though he is kind of whispering, I can clearly hear him. He sounds annoyed.

"I asked you a thousand times not to call me again." He says again. "No, no. I don't want to hear anything from you."

While he is talking over the phone, I'm trying my best not to overhear him. But the ambience here is so silent, even if I try not to hear his conversation, it reaches my ear. Seems like he is talking to someone he doesn't like to talk to.

"Well, I don't love you. End of drama," he says after a pause. "I never left you. You are the one who left me."

I guess he has ended the call because it's completely silent now.

Proving me correct, after a few minutes, he walks out behind the bookshelf. He looks flushed. The cheery look from his face is gone.

“Sorry. Needed to answer the call,” he says.

I nod. “No worries.”

“I guess you heard everything?”

I bite my lips. “Sorry, I didn’t intend to overhear the conversation, but you were not quiet enough.”

He sighs, then squeezes his forehead. “It’s fine.”

“So...call from an ex, huh?”

Looking at me, he squints. Then giving me a sad smile, he says, “Kind of.”

“Well, best of luck with that! I should get going now.” I then extend my hand towards him and smile, “Thanks for being so kind to a stranger, Raiyan.”

Raiyan returns the smile and shakes my hand, “It’s nothing, Eiliyah! See you soon?”

“Of course.”

I come back to the house from the book store with a smile on my face and a warm heart. It’s so strange isn’t it, that, sometimes the kindness and warmth you need, comes from a complete stranger you never expected and *your* people forget to show it.

After coming home, I took a shower, blow-dried my hair, and dabbed a generous amount of moisturizer on my face. Now I’m on my bed, dialing the number of Kallyanpur Orphanage Home.

“Assalamu Alaikum, Kallyanpur Orphanage Home,” its Mr. Jamil on the other side. He is the caretaker over there. I have a very good rapport

with this person. He is humble and responsible. Most importantly, he keeps an eye on Forhad for me. Forhad is a ten-year-old orphan boy who has been in the orphanage since he was five. He was left there by his aunt after his parents had died in a car accident, as it was very difficult for her to take responsibility for another kid whereas she had her own six children. She is not financially stable.

And how did I come into the picture?

A few years ago, when I was in tenth grade, I attached myself to a charity foundation. They were looking for some sponsorships, who would take financial responsibility for some orphans as a part of their voluntary work. So I tagged myself in that program. Ever since then, I used to offer tuition to little children in exchange for money, earned money by helping Aunt Trisha in her online clothing business, and donated those earnings to Forhad- the child I took responsibility for. I had seen how dreadful life can be for an orphan when I met Hussain in my childhood.

“Walaikum assalam Jamil Bhai. How are you?” I ask him.

“Alhamdulillah. How are you doing now, Eiliyah?” I informed him and Forhad about my mother’s death earlier.

“Better, Jamil Bhai. How is Forhad doing? I was supposed to come last week but with all the packing and moving, I got caught up.”

“Don’t push yourself right now. Your mother had just passed away, allow yourself some time. Don’t worry about Forhad. He is doing fine.”

“I know, he is a good kid. Can you pass him the phone?”

“Of course. Hold on a second,” I hear him putting the receiver on the table.

A few seconds later, Forhad picks up, “Ellie apu, how are you?” He sounds cheery

“I’m fine. How’s your life going? Being naughty all the time?”

He giggles, “No, I’m not naughty anymore. Besides, I complete my homework daily.”

I feel at peace hearing him happy, “That’s great! What do you want me to bring for you the next time we meet?”

He seems to think for a while, then speaks up, “Cotton Candy. The white one. I don’t like the pink one. It’s too sugary.”

I laugh, “Cotton candy only?”

“Yes!”

“Okay. Done.”

“Thank you,” he sounds happy.

“Okay, take care of yourself. We’ll meet soon, In sha Allah,” I say.

“Okay. Allah Hafiz.”

“Allah Hafiz.”

I end the call. My eyes move to the suitcases kept beside the closet, and noticing them, only one thing rings in mind—a lot of unpacking is ahead of me.

The Book-Signing

October 2018:

Areeba moves her eyes around my room from top to bottom, left to right. She helped herself by being here first thing in the morning by completely dodging my offer of video call.

“It also smells like lavender Ellie!” She starts sniffing, trying to smell the lavender from the air. “You are right, everything’s lilac here.” I laugh at her reaction.

After having our breakfast, Areeba and I are now busy unpacking my suitcases. I have a huge unpacking left. I start with the red one. I unlock it, flip it open, and my Canon 600D camera appears before me. I keep staring at it for a good twenty seconds and slowly pick it up with a gentle touch.

Areeba smiles at me, seeing me holding the camera, “Your baby, isn’t it?”

I nod. It’s been a long time since my camera was left untouched. I have done no professional courses in photography ever. It’s just become a hobby

since I was eight.

Previously, this camera belonged to my Aunt Trisha. She used to have a knack for photography, but after getting fussed up in raising Areeba, she's never got proper time to work with the camera again. So the camera had been sitting in her cabinet for roughly five years. I became the new owner of it on my twelfth birthday.

So, that was the beginning of my photography spree. I started taking at least 100 photos a day. The subjects of my pictures were mainly the people around me, nature, and still objects. One day, Aunt Trisha asked me to show her my photos. After seeing my captures, she praised me a lot. She even asked me if I was interested in getting enrolled in any photography course. The fact is, *I am* interested. There is a famous photographer—Andrea Hoffman, she is my idol. I don't know how she captures human emotion so accurately through her clicks. She offers a year-long internship under her supervision each year.

The application process is simple— go to her website, click on the **apply now** button. There you need to upload your details, your portfolio and a brief letter about— why you are interested. That's it.

The real struggle is *actually* getting the internship. It's a full paid internship that covers— living expenses and all the other expenses related to your course. So, interested people apply from all over the world. Who doesn't want to work with a renowned photographer free of cost after all? I'm one of them. But I never get to apply because of three reasons: 1. Age limit, you need to be 18+, 2. By the time I was 18+, my mom was diagnosed with cancer, so it was not an option for me to apply then, 3. Mother of all reasons— I don't think my photos are worthy of winning one of the prestigious internships.

So this is it. I never applied. And the camera which Aunt Trisha eventually gave me away to keep it forever, kept sitting in my closet for the last two years.

“You should start again,” Areeba says.

I smile, touching the camera gently, “I will.”

“What about the photography course you always wanted to do?” I know she is talking about Andrea Hoffman’s internship.

I sigh, “What about it?”

“Did you apply?” she asks, folding a scarf of mine.

I smirk, “No.”

She frowns and stops folding the scarf, “Why?”

“Because...my photos are not worthy of an internship.”

She seems disappointed at my reply, “Seriously? I didn’t expect *that* from you.”

“People from all around the world apply for this. And who am I exactly? A random girl who doesn’t have any professional skills in photography,” saying that out loud makes me believe it more.

“There’s no harm to apply either. You don’t need to sell your kidney, do you?” She scoffs. “I’m serious. Give it a try.”

I nod, knowing that I’m not going to do that. Getting rejected will break my heart more and shatter the left-over confidence I have. So, no thanks.

I stand up to keep the camera inside my closet. As only a few of the unpacking is left, I give Areeba a rest. I can do these later.

After finishing all the other tasks, I took shower and started getting ready for the book signing. Right now, I’m confused about the thing all girls get confused about while rummaging through their closet— *what to wear?*

“Wear something bright... Like red,” Areeba suggests, seeing me helplessly going through my closet.

I turn back to her, narrowing my eyes, “For your kind information ma’am, I’m not going on a date and I hate red.”

She makes a weird sound and smirks, “Did I even say that Ellie? By the way I’m kind of intrigued to meet him.”

“Yeah, me too. I love Ayaaz Abdullah.”

“I didn’t mean Ayaaz Abdullah. I haven’t even read any of his books yet.”

“You want to meet Raiyan? Then you can just go to the window next to you and yell his name. I’m pretty much positive that he will appear before you,” I tease her.

“I should be the one teasing you girl,” she throws a pillow aiming at me.

I catch it just in time. “Oh really? Why’s that?” I face her again, crossing my arms over my chest.

“He’s just invited you to a book-signing in the very first encounter. He remembers all your morning shits. The guy’s got a crush on *you*. Though it’s pretty obvious, you are a head-turner, Ellie. I feel insecure when I go out with you. And whoever likes my sister, I’m very much intrigued to meet him. How old is he by the way?” Now she teases me with a smirk on her face.

“I don’t know, probably a year or two older than me. Twenty- one, twenty-two I guess.”

Areeba smiles fiendishly, “What does he look like?”

I chuckle, “A lot better than me.”

Squinting her eyes, she says, “You look like a goddess Ellie. That means he is the Zeus of beauty.”

I laugh at her statement, “Yeah, you can say that. That guy is handsome.”

She throws me that devilish smile again.

“I have a boyfriend, Arru, so it doesn’t matter if he likes me or not. If he is the God of beauty or not,” I state the fact.

Areeba rolls her eyes hearing my statement, a sheer disappointment is gleaming there, “Yeah, yeah. A boyfriend who vanishes from time to time. Did he make any calls yet by the way?” She throws the obvious question.

“No. he didn’t.”

She shrugs, “See, he gives a zero fuck about the shit you are going through. If that person had a minimum ounce of care for you, he would’ve been glued to you since your mother’s death. But he didn’t. He is just doing what he does, pulling the invisible man stunt.”

I don’t defend myself or Aryan this time. She is right. And in my mind, I also sometimes believe it, but we *human beings* tend to ignore the fact we don’t want to face. Because facts can be heart-breaking. We *believe* what we find comfortable to *believe*.

Instead of arguing with her, I let out a heavy sigh and sit on the edge of my bed, “You know Areeba, maybe you are right. Maybe, he doesn’t care enough about me. But I have been with him since I’m acquainted with the word- Love. The thought of leaving him hurts me. I know I’m not madly in love with him but I do know that he has grown into more like my habit. A comfortable habit of which I’m not ready to let go yet.”

Areeba nods slowly. She doesn’t argue, “I hope you get your closure soon, Ellie. I just can’t see you suffer anymore.”

I smile at her. This girl loves me. As I’m the only child of my parents, I don’t have my own sibling but I can say she is the big sister I never had.

I finally throw myself into a teal blue turtle neck top and blue jeans. I put on some mascara and lipstick as well. I grab my purse and ready to leave, “Let’s go Arru. Let’s meet the man of your dreams.”

Areeba laughs out loud and pinches me, “My dream or yours?”

As we stand outside the bookstore, we can see a crowd getting inside. Lots of cars have been parked outside.

“Niceee,” Areeba says, grazing her eyes all over the store building, “Your dream guy has a taste.”

“I told you, it’s his grandfather’s store. So, the grandfather has a great taste,” I correct her. “Now let’s get inside.” I hold her hand and push our way inside through the throng.

The inside of the store has been rearranged a little bit. The store looks brighter. They have removed a few bookshelves and replaced them with a podium, a desk and an array of chairs. A stack of Ayaaz Abdullah’s newly published book can be seen on the desk. I move my eyes around to get a sight of Raiyan.

“Looking for me?” I turn around hearing the familiar voice. There he is, wearing a dark blue sweatshirt and black jeans, both hands tucked inside the jean’s pocket, looking handsome and eyes set on me. I hear Areeba gasping. Seriously Areeba? You have to do that now, right in front of him? I nudge her with my elbow.

“The arrangement is really nice, Raiyan,” I say looking around.

“Thanks,” he smiles at us.

“This is Areeba, my cousin,” I motion at Areeba. “She is also a fan of your uncle’s writing. So I hope you don’t mind that I brought her with me?”

He waves his hand dismissingly, “Not at all.” Raiyan extends his hand toward her, breaking Areeba from some kind of trance she was in, “Hello, I’m Raiyan, your cousin’s new neighbor, nice to meet you.”

“Yeah. Hi, same,” Areeba shakes his hand nervously.

“So, you too want a signed copy of *The Night Before*?” He questions Areeba.

“The night what?” Areeba frowns, having no idea of what the hell *The Night Before* is. Shit. I could have just said I brought her along for company, I regret lying now. Why did I lie in the first place?

“Well, that is what we are selling today. I thought you have heard of his recent novel,” he explains nicely, but I can see an impish smile has just escaped his mouth.

“Oh yeah. *The Night before*,” Areeba acts like now she has suddenly remembered, “The romance novel. Your uncle writes great romances, I must say.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. I just wish the earth would crack open and somehow swallow me. I was the one who lied.

I look at Raiyan nervously. He seems to be enjoying it to the fullest. “Yep, the king of romance.” He grins.

“Ummm, Raiyan, I need water. We’re coming back,” I take Areeba’s hand and push her away from his presence.

I don’t stop until we get to a quiet corner. “You fool!”

“What did I do?” Areeba, pretty much startled.

“Ayaaz Abdullah is not a romance writer, silly. He writes thrillers,” I groan, throwing my hands in the air.

“What the F,” Areeba bites her tongue. “That’s why he was grinning. He was toying with me.”

“Okay, just act like nothing happened. Okay?” I press my forehead. “This is so embarrassing. Ever since I have met him, I’ve just been the *Brand Ambassador* of embarrassment.”

“Hey, I’m sorry. It happened because of me,” she says, making a puppy face. “But gosh Ellie, if you are the *Brand Ambassador* of embarrassment, he is the *Flag Bearer* of handsomeness,” she is beaming now, “I’m in love with your new house, man. If my neighbour would look like that, I would never leave my house, I swear.”

I sigh, looking at her, watching her naivety. “Let’s go before we make it too obvious that I lied. And stop gasping in front of him. Keep thinking of your boyfriend. You have a boyfriend, remember?”

“Yeah, okay,” Areeba replies defensively.

When we get back, the event has already started. I see Raiyan standing beside the desk, assisting *The Ayaaz Abdullah* signing his books. I’m not sure if the speech giving part is over or not. Areeba and I took two seats in the first row. A girl and a guy of our age have been seated next to us.

“Hi!” The girl says as our eyes meet. “Fan of Ayaaz Abdullah?” she asks, motioning to the writer.

I nod, “Yeah.”

She smiles, “Me too. I’m Ishita, by the way.” She reaches her hand to me.

“Eiliyah,” I smile, shaking her hand.

“Alif,” the guy waves at me sitting next to her, “We’re twins.” Which explains the striking resemblance.

“Great! We’re cousins,” Areeba speaks out from her seat and waves at them. “I’m Areeba.”

“Hi Areeba,” they both wave at her.

“Have you guys ever been in a book-signing before?” The girl, Ishita asks.

Areeba and I, we both shake our heads, “Nope. You?” I ask her.

“A lot. But first time in Ayaaz Abdullah’s,” she says.

“This is the first time *ever* for us. Which book of his do you like the most?”

“The River!” Ishita replies.

“Hey same.” We high-five.

While high fiving, I notice the streaks of blue in her hair, which are looking gorgeous. “Your streaks look great. Where did you get this?” I ask her. I always wanted to color my hair with purple highlights.

“This?” she touches her blue streak, “I did it myself.”

“Whoa! Such a talent.” I’m really amazed. “I always wanted a purple streak.”

“I can do that for you if you want.” She smiles.

“That would be great.”

The guy— Alif smiles looking at us, “Do you live nearby? Because I think I saw you around today, in the morning.”

“Yep. I moved in just yesterday.”

“Great! We also live here. Right opposite to the park.” he says.

I nod at him. I saw the park earlier while jogging through the street.

“Hey, Ellie, Raiyan is probably waving at you.” Areeba nudges me, motioning to him.

I rise from the chair, he is waving at us to go there. “Let’s go,” I say.

“You go,” Areeba spans me. “I’m quite comfortable here.” I don’t forget to throw her an intense glare.

“I’ll be back,” I say to the twins and walk toward Raiyan.

“Drank enough water?” Raiyan winks at me, he seems to be amused by the whole thing. I fold my arms over my chest, “Yes.”

He laughs and turns to his uncle who is busy signing books and exchanging pleasantries with his fans. Raiyan whispers something in his ears, and he turns toward us.

“Uncle, meet Eiliyah,” Raiyan introduces me to my favorite author.

I extend my hand with a big grin on my face, “Hello sir, so happy to finally meet you.”

He doesn’t smile back. He seems somewhat annoyed? He doesn’t even take my hand; rather, he goes back to sign copies.

An awkward silence hangs here. Raiyan seems embarrassed and he is trying to read his uncle’s face who is pretty much busy signing books after books.

“I have read all of your books! How do you write so well?” I say, to break the awkwardness. He doesn’t talk back, rather he shrugs.

I feel my face blazing in anger from the arrogance of this man. But I stay quiet. I get it. He is one of the most famous authors in the country. But if we readers hadn’t read his books, he wouldn’t be famous. I look up at Raiyan whose face has turned red in shame.

I step aside and face Raiyan, “It’s getting late, and I should get back home.”

Raiyan nods. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

I purse my lips, try to smile, “It’s okay. I’ll see you around. Goodnight.”

As I turn around in the opposite direction, I hear Aziz Abdullah’s voice behind me, “Hey, don’t you want a copy?”

I mean, seriously? What does he think of himself?

“I’ll download the pirated copy, not going to pay,” I reply heading to the exit without looking back, swishing Areeba away from the chair to my arm on the way. I hear a wave of gasps behind me from the crowd as I exit.

“Eiliyah! Wait!” As I’m storming my way outside, I hear Raiyan calling me from behind.

I stop and turn around. He is rushing to us.

He stops. Areeba still seems clueless as I haven’t told her yet what just happened.

“You have no idea how ashamed I feel right now,” Raiyan says, still breathing rapidly.

I don’t say anything, instead I bite my lips. I feel enraged, but not to him. To that pathetic asshole. “Your uncle is an asshole,” there it is. I say it out loud. It feels good.

He nods his head agreeing with me, “I know he is. But I never thought he would do that to someone I know.”

“It’s not your fault.” I say.

“No, it *is* my fault. I should have seen it coming. He has always been an ass to his fans.” He pauses for a moment, and then again looks up at me, “Let me make it up to you.”

I let out a sigh.

“Can anyone tell me what exactly happened?” Areeba says, throwing her hands in the air, still clueless.

“My uncle was being rude. He didn’t even talk to her,” Raiyan says, shaking his head in disbelief.

Areeba nods slowly. Now she gets the point of me being so mad and storming my way out from the store, “Yeah you should make it up to her, he

is YOUR uncle by the way, and you invited her.”

I roll my eyes at her, by completely realizing what she’s been up to. But she doesn’t care anyway by equally completely ignoring my eye roll.

“Arru, I probably would have registered to come here even if he wouldn’t have invited me,” I say bitterly. “I’m that much of a big fan.”

“But he will feel better if he makes it up. Am I right, Raiyan?” She turns to Raiyan, dismissing me.

“I want to make it up to you, Eiliyah,” he pleads.

I finally nod at him positively, “Okay.”

“Thanks, I owe you one,” he seems relieved.

I give him a half-smile, “See you later, bye.”

“Bye Eiliyah,” he smiles back and slowly turns around to finally disappear inside the store.

We walk away and head toward home.

“You have grown a temper Ellie, I must say,” Areeba says, nudging me.

The Girl In The Woods

October 2018

By the time I got back home, it was almost 9:30 p.m. Areeba didn't get inside. She left from the gate as it was getting late and Aunt Trisha was calling her constantly.

I saw my father in the study talking to a man, probably one of his clients while crossing the dining hall towards the staircase.

I don't feel hungry so I go straight to my room instead of having dinner. My mind is still whirring in a rage regarding the incident in the bookstore. Fucking twat. I never thought a person who writes so well can be mean. Is this what fame does to people? Like those celebrities on TV? All shining and fake plastic.

As I'm whining in my mind, my eyes fall on the book piles scattered over the floor, screaming at me to put them together. I need a bookshelf and I don't have enough money to buy a damn bookshelf. I throw my phone

away out of frustration, which luckily lands on the bed. Thank God! I can't afford a new mobile right now. I drop to the floor to put the books aside.

My phone screen suddenly lights up. I pick it up to check, and it's from Aryan. I let out a sigh.

I'm sure this text is about how sorry he is that he was enormously busy. After dating for five years I know him by bones now. In the beginning, when he started showing his negligence, I used to get panicked. I used to call and text him straight in a row. Huh! Time really changes the way we react. Now when finally he calls me back, I don't giddy up anymore or shoot him with endless questions. He is my boyfriend; we are still in a relationship, and I find my comfort there. Sometimes nowadays I question myself, did we ever love each other? But there's a thing about love- you may love many times, but fall only once. I don't know whether I just love him or fell in love with him.

What's up? Gonna call you in a minute — his text says. I don't reply. I put the phone down on the floor beside me and get back to the sorting thing. It's not like I don't want to reply. I'm just too annoyed at his behaviour that it will hurt my self-respect to reply to him.

My phone rings. I'm almost 99% sure that I won't answer it, but you know the human mind, the remaining 1% always wins.

"Hello," I pick up the phone.

"Hey," he says like he's just been from Europe and is excited to see me. You know the airport scene from movies, where the hero runs towards the heroine after seeing her. "What's up?" he asks.

"Do you really want to know?" I snap.

He remains quiet for a moment, "I know I was supposed to call you, you are going through a lot," he says like a tape recorder is running on the

other side.

“Well, continue please,” I snap again.

“You know I’m going through a lot as well. I was busy sorting that out,” he says.

“Are you done being busy with your things sorting? Because I’m quite busy now sorting my books, so if you are done explaining, I need to get back.”

In reply, he sighs, “I need to talk to you about something,” and his voice sounds serious.

“Yeah talk, but be quick, please,”

“I want to talk to you in person. It’s related to marriage,” he says.

“Marriage?” well I’m stupefied now. I feel my stomach sink. I didn’t expect that to be honest. And I also don’t know what to feel or how to react to that. Yes, I haven’t thought of marriage yet because I’m only twenty-one but as he is my boyfriend, the topic has been saved for the future until now. I didn’t expect that to happen this early.

“Yes, can we meet on the 25th? At Olive’s?” He seems to be in a hurry.

25th October is five days away. But it’s good, I will have plenty of time to go through the word — marriage.

“Yeah, it’s fine. But Aryan, I haven’t thought of marriage this early,” I clarify my opinion.

“Yeah, trust me, Ellie, I haven’t either. I gotta go. Call you later. Bye,” he hangs up.

As he ends the call, it comes to my mind that today was an utterly eventful day. Too much happened. The incident in the bookstore and now this — marriage!

I go straight to bed.

When I panic, I go to bed.

When I'm angry, I go to bed.

When I'm sad, I go to bed.

Right now, I'm not sure which one I'm feeling. It will be a lie if I don't say that I feel happy too. If I get married to him, it means I will get out of this house and have my own life, my family. But the problem is—I don't feel entirely happy either. Some friends of mine get all giddy-up about the thought of marriage with their boyfriend. And here I am, confused as hell about what to feel.

“Ellie! Ellie!” I hear him calling my name. “Where are you? Come out, come out. I’m not gonna hurt you, my sweet little Ellie.”

As he looks around the bush I’m hiding behind, I press myself further into the rock, holding my breath.

It’s so dreadfully silent here in the woods that if I move an inch, he will hear it, and I can’t let that happen. I can’t let him hurt me after seeing that ugly thing.

“Ellie, you will like it. I promise you,” he calls out again.

Closing my eyes, I start praying to God. Please, God, I know that you are here. Mom said you are everywhere. Please don’t let that man hurt me. Please!

Nearby, I hear the dry leaves rustle. His footsteps are approaching.

I look behind me, if I start running through the woods now, he’ll see me. But this is the only chance I’m left with to save myself.

Easing backward in a crouch, I stand and tear off through the woods. I run without looking back.

“Ellie, I see you!” He cackles like a crazy person, and his heavy footfalls thunder behind me.

Branches and underbrush snag my feet. Blood pools from the lacerations, but I can't slow. Up ahead, I see a hut at the edge of the jungle. I need to reach it, get inside and lock the door behind me.

Keeping the hut within my sight, I summon all the energy in my body to sprint as fast as I can.

My lungs are about to burst but I don't care. I need to reach the hut. I need to get inside.

I open my eyes and find myself on my lilac bed.

As I put my hand over my forehead, I can feel the cold sweat dripping down my neck. My heart is pounding so bad that it wants to come out from the rib cage. I get up from the bed and run to the bathroom to put my head under the faucet. The cold water always helps. As the cold water runs through my hair, I try to recall the nightmare I just had. The nightmare reminds me of my mother. She used to hold me in her arms after those episodes until I calmed down. I need those arms badly right now. I need to feel her touch right at this moment. Oh God, I wish she was here! I wish she was here to hold me so tight that all those glooms and dreads would just vanish in the air.

I turn off the faucet and get up. I step out of the bathroom, trembling. As water is dripping from my hair to my neck and shoulder, it gives me chills down the bones. I take out a towel from the closet and wrap it around my head. I need to change the dress too, as it got wet from the water. But the last ounce of energy has left my body at this point. So, I give up. I climb up

on my bed in wet clothes. And pull the blanket over me, hugging the side pillow so hard that if it wasn't made of cotton balls, it would break.

The Treasure

I was on my bed with Mr. Dino beside me. Doggo was sleeping on the chair. It was evening then, and I needed to get ready for the party. Baba threw a party that night for his office colleagues. My mom was cooking all day. The menu was delicious enough to make me drool. I even noticed Doggo drooling, and wagging his tail while he was in the kitchen.

“Ellie, put this dress on, guests are on their way,” my mom said, placing the dress over the edge of my bed and then left hurriedly. I nod. But I was feeling so sleepy that I could fall asleep anytime. I closed my eyes for a while.

“Ellie! Wake up!” I jolted up, flipping my eyes open, and found my mother hovering over me, shaking my arms. I sat up, rubbing my eyes. “What happened?”

She placed her arms over her chest, clearly disappointed, “The guests are here, and your father is looking for you.”

I checked the time on the clock. It was eight. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. It’s still eight. How come it’s eight!

It'd been only ten minutes since I closed my eyes. "Hurry up!" she said, leaving the room.

I then headed to the washroom and splashed some water on my face. Drying my face off with a towel, I put on the red frock my mom had given me earlier. I looked at the chair. Doggo was not sleeping anymore. He was wide awake. "You could have woken me up, silly," I said to him. In reply, he made this squeaky sound, cocking his head to me.

Lots of guests had arrived. As I stepped into the living room, I caught my father chatting with a bald man and my mother sitting on the couch, busy talking with a woman.

"Ellie! Come over here." My father waved at me, noticing me on the doorstep. I walked over to him.

Pushing me aside, he said, "What have you worn?"

As he said that, I looked down at my dress, and to my surprise; I found it was red, but not the red dress my mom put on there. It's a dress I used to wear casually. As I was still sleepy, I didn't quite realize which dress I was putting on. I then look at my father fearfully. He seemed utterly annoyed with me. I disappointed him again.

"I'm sorry, I fell asleep. I didn't notice what I was wearing," I said in a hope of calming him down, though in the back of my mind I knew he wouldn't. His nostrils were flaring, and his grip over the water glass he was holding tightened. I moved my gaze from him to my feet. I couldn't look at him.

My father then raised his glass and poured the water over my head. I felt all the eyes in the living room set upon me, piercing me with their silence. The next thing I could remember, I was running to the rooftop, both hands covering my face.

“That was so harsh, Maa?” says Sarah.

Running my fingers through her hair, I reply, “Yes. It was. And I wish no child ever goes through the painful childhood I went through.”

She nods. Then she takes my hand in hers.

I smile and pinch her cheek.

As I reached the rooftop, I dropped onto the floor. I wiped my cheek as tears didn't stop coming out. Doggo followed me behind, he was nudging me with his nose. I wrapped my hands around his neck as if he could soak all the hurt in himself. I was feeling so ashamed at that moment, I could picture in my head all the people downstairs who were talking about me. They were probably thinking how stupid of a girl I was.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder. As I spun my head around, I found my mother was standing behind me, her eyes glossy.

“Ellie,” her voice was soft. “Sweetie,” she sat beside me, pulling me in her arms, which made me want to cry more.

“Why does Baba have to be so mean to me always? Why does he like to hurt me?” A hiccup came out as I spoke. “Shhhh, sweetie. Don't say like that,” she said, rubbing the back of my head to pacify me. But I'm not the one who was troubled here. It's Baba who was always angry.

“Baba actually loves you a lot, but he is a little of an angry man,” mom said.

Which is a lie she told me a thousand times. I never believed her.

“You are lying,” I opposed, as always. “You don't hurt those you love. You said it to me.”

“I know, I know. Mom also scolds you sometimes, don’t I? Does that mean I don’t like my little Ellie?” she said, looking at me.

I loved my mother’s eyes. It’s big and wide. She always looked at me like I was the only thing she had. I tightened my grip around her more, pressing my cheek against her chest. My mother had a sweet smell. I always used to stuff my nose in her chest to smell her. “I love you, Mom. But I hate baba.” Which was true. I really hated Baba.

“Don’t say that Ellie. We both love you. But you know, sometimes, we show it differently. Your father has his own way to show his affection,” saying that her voice cracked.

My father had no way of showing affection to anyone. I never saw him talking to my mother pleasantly. He didn’t even talk to his parents and siblings that much. They sometimes used to visit us, but my mother did all the things: from cooking for them to chat with them, she did all of it. My father just stayed in a corner— annoyed, reading a newspaper or magazine.

“Hey, Ellie!” I turned around and saw Nirjhor Bhai.

Mom got up. “I need to go check on the guests. Can you sit with her for a bit?” Mom asked Nirjhor Bhai.

“Sure.”

Nirjhor Bhai then sat beside me. Mom left.

“You are upset.” He said.

I nod. I was upset and angry.

“Let’s go downstairs. I will feed you, then you can go to bed.”

“But I want to stay here a little longer.” I really didn’t want to walk past the guests there. Nirjhor Bhai seemed to understand that.

“Okay, we will stay here as long as you want,” he replied, pinching my cheek.

Doggo got up and dropped himself on my lap. He always seemed to understand me. He was always around whenever I was sad. I sometimes wished I was a dog, then I would run away from here with him. Far away from here. Far away from my father.

October 2018

I don't know how long I slept. A stream of light is seeping inside the room from the gap between the drapes. Either it's early in the morning or the sun is setting down. I turn aside to check my phone- 5:30 p.m.

My eyes go wide.

5:30 p.m!

I slept for 14 hours straight! I need to get up ASAP. As I try to pull my head up from the pillow, I feel nauseous and dizzy. I sit on my bed, my head is spinning. I hear footsteps approaching my room from the corridor. It's my father. He stops at the door, "You're up!"

I squint my eyes, my head is hurting badly, "Why didn't any of you wake me up? I slept through all day."

Baba steps inside the room and sits on the bed beside me. "You've got a fever. Your forehead was literally burning."

Ah, so this is the reason I feel dizzy and my head feels heavy. "Yeah, I slept in a wet cloth. That must be the reason, and also the season is changing".

Baba nods slowly. "I'm sending your aunt. She will help you change clothes and you need to eat."

I wave my hands defensively. "Nah. It's okay. I'm fine. I can change myself. I'm coming downstairs to have food".

“I’m sending food to your room. You don’t have to go downstairs”.

I nod at him. Suddenly, I’m feeling this urge to hold my father and sleep in his lap. But as soon as I desire it, the thought flees away from my mind in twice stronger force. Maybe I’m missing my mom. I hate this new form of attention, though. And I don’t recognize this newly refined version of my father. He has been softened since my mother fell sick. But the previous version of him is so strong in my mind that it’s impossible for me to completely uproot it.

When I was younger, I wanted to grow up. I always wanted to grow up. I hated to see my parents fighting. I hate my father for hating me.

I always wanted my father to brush his fingers through my hair while I was asleep.

I wanted him to tell me all those bedtime stories about ghosts and witches.

I just wanted him to look at me with all the love in the world. I just wanted a normal family life, a boring yet normal childhood.

As I grew older, I got to realize that, as much as I craved those things from my father, he was incapable of giving me that. But when you are a child, you are not supposed to realize life’s equation. Life is not all black and white. It’s grey. It’s not only about addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, it’s so much more than that. It’s the composition of all the calculations and science out there.

Baba picks up his cell phone and dials a number. From the context of his phone call to the other person, I can tell it’s a doctor, and he has requested him to come over. To check me up.

“You don’t have to call the doc. I’ll be fine tomorrow.” I don’t want my father to call a doctor over a normal fever. Besides, it’s embarrassing to

have a house doctor visiting me just for a fever.

“He will prescribe some antibiotics and the fever won’t come back,” he says. “Now change your clothes, I’m sending food,” he gets up and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

I sit quietly on my bed for a moment, checking my phone- five missed calls and two texts from Areeba, two missed calls from Aunt Trisha, and some other texts from my university friends. I toss the phone back and descend from the bed. I feel extremely weak in the knee. Quickly changing myself into a mint-green T-shirt and a pair of white trousers, I check my face in the dresser’s mirror. It looks a few shades paler. My head spins again. I pick a book from the floor and rush towards the bed again. I will read. I can’t expect myself to lie down on the bed all day and do nothing. I can’t just stare at the ceiling and contemplate my depressing life.

I fell asleep again. I pull my eyes open as a hand is nudging me gently and my father’s face is hovering over me. I can see an elderly person behind him and Raiyan.

Wait, Raiyan? Is it him? What is he doing here?

“Raiyan?” I ask as I try to sit up.

“He said you both know each other,” Baba replies instead of him, “His grandfather — Mr. Fawad Abdullah,” Baba says. “He was a medicine specialist once, now retired. We met the other day in the supermarket. They live next door. So, I requested him to come over.”

Raiyan doesn’t grin this time. Seeing me, he rather presses his lips together and tries to smile, “Hey.”

“Hi,” I wave at him.

“Assalamu Alaikum.” I greet his grandfather.

“Walaikum Assalam,” he replies and takes a seat on the armchair placed beside my bed. Raiyan looks a lot like his grandfather, except his grandfather is probably in his 70’s. They have identical eyes, the wide set hazel-brown eyes, and the face — calm and poised.

“Seems like seasonal flu,” says Mr. Abdullah.

I nod. “I slept in wet clothes last night,” I explain to him.

He frowns, probably thinking why on earth someone would go to bed in wet clothes but doesn’t ask further questions.

“Hm, that was the trigger, then.” He says and tears out a page from his notepad, and starts prescribing medicines, “Take these medicines three times a day and don’t sleep in wet clothes next time.” He smiles as he hands over the prescription to my father.

“Why did you sleep in wet clothes?” Baba asks me, curiously. “It’s getting cold nowadays.”

My brain is working in full swing now to make up a believable answer.

“I was feeling hot.” I come up with the shittiest answer ever. Baba frowns but says nothing.

“Is that—**Tell me your dreams?**” Mr. Abdullah points toward the book on the bed. I was reading it earlier.

“Yes, do you read Sidney Sheldon?” I ask him.

“Of course. I have all of them. My wife especially used to like his writing,” he says.

“Wow! I would love to meet her,” I say.

The cheery look on his face dims out. “She is no more. She passed away a few years ago.”

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

He gives me a half-hearted smile.

“Nana Bhai has an enormous collection at home,” Raiyan says.

“He is right. I have my own library in my home. Come over sometimes if you are a book hoarder.”

“I will.” I smile at him and then take a glance at Raiyan, who is watching me intently. He seems off.

Mr. Abdullah rises from the chair to leave. Raiyan whispers something to him. He nods and leaves. As both of them leave, Raiyan turns around and sits in the chair his grandfather was sitting on. He sets his gaze upon me, “So, you slept in wet clothes in this weather, hats off to you.”

I roll my eyes, “First tell me- are you really here to check on me?”

“Why? Is it weird that I came to see you?” He questions back.

“No, not weird, but I feel like you are actually feeling bad for me that your uncle acted rude last night. That’s why you came,” I tell him.

“Yeah, that too. But mostly I really wanted to check on you because you were perfectly fine the last time I saw you,” he says.

I laugh, “See I knew.”

He chuckles, “How are you feeling now?”

“I’m fine, actually.”

As he leans toward me and places the back of his palm on my forehead to check the temperature, I smell a mix of citrus and cinnamon perfume coming from him.

“You’re scorching warm,” he says.

Layla, our house help, enters the room, carrying a tray full of food in her hands. She places the tray on my bed quietly and leaves. I move my glance at the food, but I don’t feel like eating anything. There are sandwiches, pancakes, apples on the tray, and a big jug of orange juice. I feel bitter in my mouth. It’s not like I hate these foods. I’m just not hungry.

“Have you eaten anything?” He asks me.

“No, and not gonna eat either.” I dismiss the idea of eating.

“You look pale. You need to eat.” He doesn’t wait for my reply, rather he places two sandwiches on a plate and pours me a glass of orange juice.

I groan but reach my hand to grab the plate, anyway. “Please eat with me. It’s your first visit to my place. If you don’t eat, I will feel bad otherwise,” I say, taking a bite from the sandwich.

He laughs and takes a sandwich from the plate. “You always talk like that?”

“Talk like what?”

“Sharp like a shard.” He says without breaking eye contact.

I laugh and take a sip from the glass. “You mean the way I said middle finger to your uncle?”

He looks ashamed again. His cheeks turn red. He breaks his gaze and smiles nervously, “No. I didn’t mean that. He was being super rude. So you can say *middle finger* to him.”

I nod.

His eyes wander around my room as he is eating and land on the photo of my mother and me on the nightstand. He stares at it for a moment and picks it up to get a better look. “I was about to ask you earlier as I saw it entering your room. Is it your mother in the photo?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“You are the spitting image of your mother!” His eyes are stuck in the photo. He brushes his finger on the glass and smiles. “And it’s you beside her,” he says so softly, like he is talking to the little me in the photo.

“Yeah, I was eight,” I say.

He doesn't put the photo frame back on the nightstand right away, rather he keeps watching it, and then gently puts it back. He looks at me and his eyes are gleaming.

"What?" I ask him.

He gives me a long gaze and then says, "You have always been beautiful. You were beautiful then, you are beautiful now."

While he says that, I don't see him smiling, rather he sounds sad.

"Are you being sad because I have always been pretty?" I tease him. The air between us is getting heavier. I want to light it up.

He laughs, then gets up from the chair, and starts walking around the room. He stops where some of my captured photos are hanging from the wall. The photo he is looking at right now is a photo of a girl holding her cat, smiling directly facing the camera. It's one of my favourite clicks. It reminds me of my Doggo.

"Incredible," he murmurs, checking the photo. "You clicked it?" he asks me, eyes still fixed on the picture.

"Yep," I answer. "But how did you guess I clicked it?"

He turns around, "Your signature is there."

"Oh." Of course, I signed it.

"So, you do photography as well?" he says, checking the next photo.

"I do. I love it."

"Yeah, your shots say it all. If you didn't love it, it was impossible to capture such emotions," he says, brushing his finger on a photo.

I smile, "Then you need to see Andrea Hoffman's clicks. She is the master of capturing emotions."

"Who is she?" He asks.

“My idol. I once dared to dream of doing an internship under her supervision,” I say, letting out a sigh.

“Once dared? Why didn’t you go for it?” He turns around again, now facing me.

“I’m an amateur. Do you really think she will take me in?”

“Why not? Your photos are amazing.”

“Would you do it? If you were in my place?”

“I know I would at least try,” he replies firmly.

I nod, “Probably I will... one day.”

He then eyes me for a moment, then again starts moving around.

His eyes get stuck on the floor where all my books and notepads are piled up together.

“Do you need a bookshelf?” He gestures at the piles.

“Not only needed, badly needed,” I groan. “But I need to save some money to buy one.”

He nods and crouches down to pick up **The Alchemist**. “Did you read it?” He asks me.

“Yes, several times. One of my favorites. Did you?”

“Yes,” he turns over the cover, runs through the pages, and stops somewhere, “Remember that wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure — my favourite line.”

“And where is your heart, Raiyan?” I tease him.

But he doesn’t seem to be teased; rather, he throws me one of his intense gazes and asks, “What’s your favourite line?”

I scoff and clear my throat. His watching me intently makes me nervous. Not a bad kind of nervousness, it’s a kind I can’t explain. “*When*

you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it — my favourite line,” I reply.

“Yeah, that’s a nice one.”

“Do you believe in it?” I ask him.

“Yes, I do because when you truly want something, it is actually you, who works hard to get it by turning everything in your favor slowly.” He puts the book back down on the pile.

“You know, I started reading it because I thought it’s probably a treasure hunt book. I didn’t know what I was going to experience ahead.” I pause. “The boy found his treasure, but by the time he found it, the meaning of treasure had changed for him.”

He smiles and nods slowly. “You like to read too, I guess?” I ask him.

“Yes,” he replies. He moves around again, “Nice room you have.”

“Really? You don’t think it’s too much?” I frown.

“No. I like spacious rooms. My one is also the same size,” he says.

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t mean that. I meant the whole grandeur of the house. Everything is flashy.”

He laughs, “Yeah, that’s true. But I must say you have a great terrace. If you want to switch the house with me, I will take it in a sweep just for the terrace alone. It has a spectacular view.” He moves towards the terrace door, pushes it open and a bulk of cold air jumps inside the room. I wrap the blanket all around me immediately like a ghost, all covered in white except the eyes.

He notices that right away and closes the door. “Sorry.” He laughs again, looking at my ghostly appearance. “You are kind of cute.”

I smile, “Kind of? I *am* cute.”

He gleams. “I have never seen you around here before that night.”

“Yes, because I had never been here before that night.” I pause a little. “Baba moved in recently. I joined two weeks later. You and your parents live with your grandfather?” I ask him.

He shakes his head, “No, just me.”

“You are here to take care of your grandfather?”

His gaze gets intense again, “No. That old man is more fit than I will ever be.”

“And your parents?”

He fixes his eyes at his feet, then looks up at me again, “My mother doesn’t live here, she is in the USA. And I don’t have my father.”

There it is, the answer behind his eyes getting intense. He is also one parent “gone” like me.

I nod at him slowly, “Sorry.”

He says nothing back.

“I should get going,” he says suddenly. Stepping towards my bed, he presses my shoulder firmly and says, “You take a rest. Good night.”

“Good night. See you around.”

I didn’t stop him or ask him further questions because I know how it feels, not having one of your parents. I have probably reminded him of a buried wound he doesn’t want to get reminded of. I feel that because I know a lot about buried wounds because that’s what I have been doing all my life, burying all the scars so deep that I can’t even reach them. Probably he also did the same as me. Hid it so deep that digging it would cause more afflictions than healing. Probably, this is the reason I talked a little about my pain to him because only a wounded soul can recognize another wounded one.

6

Twilight

October 2018

I like the ambiance of this new restaurant — Inka. It's outdoorsy, so you can actually get the complete fall vibe and their top-notch music selection; they are not playing songs but rather a symphony. I like it.

It's been a few days since the day I've fallen sick. I'm still recovering. But I needed to come here to meet Aryan. Otherwise, I would probably die out of curiosity about what he has to say about marriage.

There he is, walking towards my table. He isn't smiling, rather he looks like his mind is somewhere else.

"Hey," he bends down to hug me and takes the seat across my chair, "you look not- so- well."

"I'm not. I have been sick for the last five days. But obviously, you didn't know."

I see a glimpse of shame in the corner of his eye. "Sorry, Ellie. I was really busy."

“You always are.”

“You are still in university. You won’t know how pathetic corporate life can be. Anyway, I’m sorry, okay?” Then he takes the menu from the table. “What do you want to order?”

“I’m not hungry. I have lost my appetite since the day I fell sick.”

“Still you need to eat,” then he waves at the waiter and places an order of two French fries, two enchiladas, one white sauce pasta, two pieces of bbq chicken, and two crème brûlée — all my favorites. But that’s a lot. He never orders that much food. He is not a foodie like me.

“That’s a lot,” I say.

He smiles, “You have become thinner Ellie, do you know that?”

Why do I feel like a sheep who is being fed well just before the slaughter? Because THIS IS NOT the Aryan I’m used to. It’s always me who orders food. He barely eats and rarely pays the bills.

“I know. How’s your office going?”

He shrugs. “As usual. I’m eying for a promotion.”

I nod. “That’s good.”

“How’s your class going?”

“I dropped the semester. Hopefully, I’ll take the next one in January.”

“Yeah, do whatever suits you.” He smiles.

He is edgy for some reason. It’s visible in his demeanor. He is not still in his seat. His eyes are wandering and his fingers fidgeting.

The food arrives.

“You wanted to talk about marriage?” I say, throwing a stick of French fry in my mouth.

“Yeah.” He seems nervous while saying that. “Let’s finish the food first.”

I shake my head. “No, tell me now.”

He clears his throat. “Remember the time I went to Australia?”

I nod, throwing another piece of fries into my mouth.

“My sister introduced me to a girl there. She is the sister of her friend. And now my family wants me to marry her.”

“Then?” I wave to him to continue.

“You didn’t get it, El,” he says, pressing his lips together. His voice has this serious tone.

“Enlighten me. You said you are here to talk about marriage. Your parents want you to marry a girl they know. Did you tell your parents about me yet?” I really don’t get what he is dithering to say.

He shakes his head. “I couldn’t. They won’t accept you.”

For a moment nothing of what he has just said gets inside my head, “What do you mean? Why won’t they accept me?”

“It’s a lot,” he says, looking at his feet.

“Tell me,” I feel my jaw has just hardened.

“My parents are very conservative, you know,” he says, “They don’t like people from broken families, your parents, they were divorced. And also, they want someone from a doctor’s background.”

“Broken family and doctor,” I mumble.

Suddenly, everything around me seems so dumbfounded and stupid.

I feel stupid.

How stupid I am that here he would never introduce me to his parents because, according to him, I’m from a broken family and not a doctor or a future doctor, and there I was, confused about my mixed feeling and sure of the fact that he would talk about our marriage.

Why did he start a relationship with me in the first place if he feels so embarrassed about me?

Now I can connect all the dots. All of them.

His family was pushing him for marriage and they found the perfect girl, his sudden weird behaviour by being aloof because he also thinks that the girl is perfect whereas I am not.

I'm just a broken girl from a broken family who is not good enough to get married.

I don't follow what he is saying right now. All I see is his lips moving. It's like something has muffled his voice to get inside my ears. I slowly rise from the chair and start walking towards the exit. I don't want to hear anything that comes out of his mouth.

I walk when I feel angry and overwhelmed.

Right now, I'm enraged and I'm walking toward home. Home is quite far away, but I don't care.

I don't look back to check whether he is following me, though part of me wants him to follow me, apologize to me and say that — whatever he said, it's a joke.

Even in my infuriating mind, I feel like laughing at myself. I've been such a joke to him all these years. Life is so strange that when it starts throwing garbage, it throws all of them one by one at a time.

I don't know how long I've been walking, but I see the corner of our gate. As I'm storming through the sidewalk, suddenly someone grabs my hand and stops me from behind. I shove the hand off. "Stay away from me."

"Eiliyah!" I turn around and see Raiyan. He is heaving and looks worried.

I take three steps back. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it's you."

“I know. I’ve been calling and running after you. You didn’t hear.” He is still breathing rapidly. “What happened? You look terrified. Are you okay?”

I chuckle. Okay? I don’t know when was the last time I was okay.

I glance at my feet, pressing my lips together, “I’m not okay, Raiyan.”

I don’t know why, but a teardrop has just escaped my eyes, probably I was holding it in for so long and today when someone asked me for the first time in a while if I was okay, I couldn’t hold it.

“Heyyy, come here.” He places his arms around me and pats my shoulder firmly.

My chest tightens and all the tears I’ve been holding back till now want to flood me away. But I don’t allow it to flood me over. Rather, I wipe the tears off my face.

“You want to come inside?” He motions towards a wooden gate.

I realize we are standing in front of his house.

I nod. It’s better if I calm myself down a bit at his home before going back to mine to avoid all the explanations I’ll have to give to my father if he sees me in this condition.

I follow him through the living room to the dining hall. It seems like no one is home.

“What time of the day do you like the most, Eiliyah?” He spins around suddenly.

“Twilight,” I reply.

“Same,” he smiles, “Let’s go to the rooftop, there is nothing more beautiful in the world than a sunset in the fall evening.” He turns around and heads upstairs.

When we reach the rooftop, the sky above greets us with its magnificence. The entire sky is painted in a bright pink hue with a dash of

orange here and there.

As the sun was setting down behind a golden cloud, it was throwing thousands of spear-like rays around it. I keep watching this spectacular creation of God and can't get enough of it.

"Isn't it beautiful Ellie?"

I look at him and find his eyes set on the horizon. He looks peaceful, and the soft glow of the twilight is spread all over his face. Also, I noticed he called me Ellie for the first time.

"It's majestic, Raiyan." I reply, looking at the grandeur in front of us.

I drop to the floor, drawing my knees close to my chest. He sits beside me and we keep watching the sunset without saying a word. Some moments deserve to be spent in silence.

"What made you so upset today?" Raiyan asks finally.

I don't know what to say in reply. What exactly made me upset?

"I don't even know whether I was upset or angry. I don't know which feeling was stronger." I take a breath and decide to tell him, to let it all out, "I guess I was disturbed, sad and angry. My boyfriend of five years told me today that he was going to marry another girl because he was embarrassed to tell his parents about me."

"Embarrassed?" He frowns.

I chuckle, "Yeah. Neither my parents were together, which makes me a girl from a broken family, nor I'm a soon-to-be doctor. So, yeah. I'm not good enough."

For a moment, he says nothing. "Why did he waste your time all these years then? Did you want to marry him? Or do you want to get married now?"

I sigh. “Part of me was excited when he told me over the phone that he wanted to talk about marriage because I was thinking I could start my own life afresh. I still didn’t know that it was about marriage, but just not with me. But yes, a part of me was confused and scared at the thought of it,” I say to him. The sheer honesty. “You know, I even felt guilty at a point that I was being confused. Fifty shades of feelings,” I smirk. “Things actually were not going well between us for a while. He changed a lot since the last year. We were in a relationship but drifted away from each other a long time ago.”

“You actually knew that something was off about him. That’s what made you confused and scared. We don’t get into confusion or embarrassment when we are sure about someone. Love doesn’t work that way,” he says.

Okay, that hurts. “You meant I don’t love him?” I look right into his eyes.

He doesn’t look away. He keeps watching me for a minute, then glances away right beyond the sky, to a flock of birds returning home.

“Maybe you loved him at one point. But that love died a while ago. All you have now is a habit of him.” He pauses, then says, “And he, on the other hand, is a coward who doesn’t know how to love. When you love someone, you love every single bit of them. You know Ellie, love comes later. First, there should be respect, trust, and compassion for each other, then love follows.”

I stay silent. I know every word coming out of his mouth is the truth. Even, I said those things to Areeba a few nights ago, I just refused to believe it out loud. Before today, I was living in an illusion, though Aryan

had literally screamed all these things without making a sound. But illusion breaks, and so does our heart.

“We all tend to live inside a glass bubble which we wrap up from within with blankets and pillows and get so comfortable which makes us forget the fact that it’s made of glass and can break any time,” he says, glancing back at me. “But it’s okay. Unless the bubble breaks, we don’t get to feel the ground beneath us and look around without a glass barrier.” He smiles.

I don’t smile back. Rather, I ask, “Have you ever got your heart broken, Raiyan?”

The smile from his face fades away, a sombreness shrouds it. “Yes.”

“Well, you know how dreadful it is, then.”

We become silent again and feel the darkness gathering around us. The sky is no longer pink-hued now. It’s getting darker. It’s getting chillier as well, and suddenly I feel cold. Probably the huge bump in my vein has cooled down a little. I wrap my arms around myself. He notices it and gets up from the floor. “I’m bringing you a shawl, and do you want coffee?”

I nod. I really need something warmer.

After a few minutes, He comes back with a shawl, two cups of coffee, and a jar of cookies.

“Umm, the coffee smells nice,” I say.

As he leans on to pass me the cup, I notice a silver chain around his neck with a pendant on it. I saw a glimpse of it several times before but never saw it perfectly, as it’s always underneath his shirts. There is something Arabic written on the pendant. “What’s written on the pendant?” I ask him.

He seems like he didn’t get it, then I repeat, “The pendant, you are wearing right now.”

“Oh!” He hesitates for a moment, then pulls it out from inside. It’s a medium-sized silver pendant engraved with an Arabic verse: Wahuwa ma’akum, ayna ma kuntum. Meaning- he is with you, wherever you are, written all over it.

My eyes widen and a fond memory from childhood lights up my face. “I also had the same pendant when I was a child. My mom gave it to me. We had three of them in our house. One was mine, one was my mom’s, and another one I gave to a friend — Hussain.” I still remember those days. “He was an orphan,” I say, taking a sip from the coffee cup.

“Your friend?” Raiyan asks.

I nod, “Yeah. There was an orphanage right next to our house. He used to live there. We both were two sad children who had their fair share of miseries. But whenever I asked Hussain to play with me in our front yard, he used to leap up and smile.” As much as those memories are enough to make me sad, it makes me smile now. “You know, he was the one who encouraged me to read fiction.”

“How?”

“Once he was in our house, he noticed the bookshelf in the living room. He got excited seeing that. He asked me if I ever read Peter Pan because it was his favorite. I said no. He then suggested I read it. Then every day, I used to see him reading books quietly, far away from the children’s crowd. I asked him, ‘Why do you read so much?’ You know what he replied?”

“What?” Raiyan asks.

“To escape,” I smile, looking at him, “He replied. He read to escape. Quite heavy, isn’t it, for that age of him? He was only one or two years older than me, I guess. His reply kept me thinking. Then he explained, that his life in that orphanage was difficult. It was brutal sometimes. So he used

to borrow books from the library, and indulge himself in reading to avoid whatever scary things had been happening around him. As I think of his reply now, I realize he had turned more mature than his age at that point.”

Raiyan nods. “Life in an orphanage is not supposed to be easy. It was the harshness of the world that made him mature early, and reading helped him to cope with it.”

“And slowly, it became my escape strategy, too. I kept reading and reading. I used to read everything in my reach. From newspapers to the labels of bottles. From fiction to biography. Everything,” I say, “And I did, I escaped. I kept moving with the flow of life.”

“Did you live it? Your life?” Raiyan asks.

I scoff, “Did I live it?” It’s a huge question. I feel a lump in my throat as I’m about to come up with the obvious answer, “I was so busy escaping it, Raiyan, I forgot to live.” I let out the sigh, which was building up inside my chest. “Did you live yours?” I ask him back.

He gives me a half-hearted smile. “One day, someone saved my life and now I dare to not live it, it would be an atrocity to not live the life I was re-given.”

“Who? Is it the girl you were talking to over the phone in the bookstore that day?”

He smiles. “That’s a discussion for another day.”

“Okay. Noted.” I smile then lean in to touch his pendant, “Where did you get yours?” I ask him.

“From a store, I guess. I was young, can’t remember exactly,” he shrugs.

“Yeah, they used to sell plenty of them back then.”

“Drink the coffee. It’s getting colder.” He grabs a cookie from the jar.

“So, how many times have you been heartbroken?” I pop the question.

He gives me a sad smile, “Twice.”

I size him up from the corner of my eyes and say, “Did you love her?”

“Who?” He asks, chewing the cookie.

“The girl who broke your heart.”

He stops chewing and glances at me. The smile on his face has faded.

“There were two. I loved both of them but one of them broke my heart so bad that I feel nothing for her now... And the other girl...” He takes a pause. I see the pain in his eyes as he mutters the next sentence, “That girl saved my life, Ellie. I owe my whole life to her.”

So the girl he loves so endearingly saved his life. I continue watching him. I have probably reminded him of another buried wound. I squeeze his hand firmly. “Where is she now? What happened to her?”

He says nothing right away. Then he slowly shakes his head, “We left each other.”

This boy still loves that girl. I can see that right in his eyes. Maybe he fell in love with her, whereas Aryan and I, we just loved each other, never fell.

I scoot closer to him, rest my head lightly on his shoulder and give his palm a tight squeeze. Somehow, my heart is feeling heavier from seeing him in despair than my own share of agony. Perhaps this is what falling deeply in love feels like. We are all sucked out by the person’s grief who has lost it. His sadness has silenced even my despair, the one I was feeling a few moments ago.

We get up to go home, as I’m feeling much better now. He walks me to our gate even though I live just next door.

“Save your number,” Raiyan passes me his phone. I take it out of his hand, save it, and give him back. He rings my number and says, “Save it.”

I add his number to my contact list. “Done.”

He takes a step closer and says, “Call me anytime, if you need anything. Okay?”

I raise my brows and grin, “Aren’t you worried that I might call you in the middle of the night and start talking crap about my sad life?”

He laughs and gives my hair a little tousle. “We all talk crap at some point. But call me if you don’t feel good.”

I nod and say goodnight to him before heading towards the front door through the lawn. I glance back in the midway and find him still standing at the gate, hands inside the pocket, watching me.

Ever since I met him, he made sure of my comfort around him by never questioning me unnecessarily, not judging me, by being as kind as possible. If he is this gentle to a person he has just met a few days ago, I wonder how affectionate he was to her? How could they leave each other? What went wrong?

As I was crossing the dining hall, I found Aunt Rubina and Baba at the table. Baba is reading a newspaper, and she is sewing. Baba glances up for a moment, then goes back to reading the newspaper.

“Where have you been?” Aunt Rubina asks me.

“Next door. Raiyan’s place.”

She nods, “Be careful about him though. I have heard rumors about him.”

“What rumors?” I ask her, stepping closer.

She shrugs, “Just this and that. Regarding his mother. She is not a good woman. Used to hang around with a lot of guys.”

I smirk, “Really? I should be careful around him because his mother supposedly has some reputation?” Every word in my sentence is screaming with irritation and my father seems to catch the sharpness of my voice.

“I’m saying it for your own good.” She replies.

I step more closely to my aunt by completely disregarding my father’s unapproving look.

“You know, my mother had also grown quite a rumor for herself. You know why?” My voice has got sharper than before, “Because she was divorced. Being divorced was her only fault.”

Aunt Rubina’s face gets reddened. “You are just like your mother,” she murmurs.

And it gets me on right at my nerve, “You are right. I am.”

“Ellie, go to your room,” Baba says.

I turn to him, “Go to your room? Do you know, Baba, that your daughter used to be called slut in her school because her parents were divorced? Oh! How would you know? You were busy all your life in your job, in your study, and thinking of inventing new ideas to hurt your only daughter!”

My face gets twitched from the rage I’m feeling inside. “Was it my mother’s fault that she got divorced? Is it my fault that today my boyfriend ditched me because I am from a broken family? I was just a little girl, Baba, when you poured a whole glass of water over my head in a room full of people. How would you know how much it hurts to be your daughter?”

The color of his face changed as I uttered the last sentence. Aunt Rubina has stopped sewing and staring right at me now.

“None of it was my fault, neither my mom’s. Because of the shallow and nasty thinking of people like you, we get bullied, we get ditched, we become the subject of rumors,” my yelling reverberates through the wall of the dining hall as the whole ambience falls silent.

“You judge that boy from the rumor his mother has. The same thing happened to me a thousand times. Next time, before judging someone, just remind yourself of the fact that your daughter used to be a slut to the entire world.” I spin around and storm my way out of the room, heading upstairs.

As soon as I reach my room, I slam the door behind me and throw myself on the bed. I wipe the tears off my cheeks. I recall all the memories of being the slut in school, being the out-pour of my father’s constant disappointment.

I never yelled at anyone for calling me a slut. Neither have I ever told any of my parents how it used to tear me apart by being a constant subject of my father’s bitterness, rather I bottled it up deep inside until today.

I didn’t have any friends left in school after my parent’s divorce. They used to feel ashamed of me more than I have ever felt for myself. And for the first time in my life, I feel thankful for that.

I feel thankful that I didn’t have any pretentious friends left.

I feel thankful that I don’t have that boyfriend anymore who is embarrassed by me.

I feel thankful that I, and especially my mother, lived away from my father for the last few years of her life.

The Glass Bubble

“Have you ever seen the ocean, Hussain?” I asked him. We were watching the stars together.

“No. I haven’t.” He replied.

“Me neither. I’ve heard from my mom that it’s magnificent. The most enchanting thing in the world. I want to see it.”

“I have read about it in the books. I watched it on TV. It’s beautiful,” Hussain said.

“You have a TV in the orphanage?” I asked him. Because once a boy had told me from there that they didn’t have any TV or radios in the orphanage.

“No. Back home, we had a TV.”

“Oh,” I didn’t ask him anything further about his parents. Mom asked me not to.

Because it’s not nice to ask orphans about their dead parents.

Hussain met my mom the other day. He came over for lunch. Mom cooked pulao and chicken curry for him. She said, “You can come over

anytime you want.” Whereas, Baba said, “Don’t hang out with him too much, Ellie. These types of kids are troublesome and opportunistic.”

I wanted to shout at him and tell him he was a nice boy. He loved Doggo, he never made fun of me, and Mom also liked him. But I didn’t shout. Because if I shouted at him, he wouldn’t ever allow me to talk to Hussain again. So, I remained quiet.

“I love watching the night sky.”

“Me too.” His eyes were skyward.

“I like that star more. It’s the brightest,” I said, pointing at the nearest star to the moon.

Hussain laughed quietly. “That’s not a star. It’s a planet.”

“What! No way! Why is it beaming, then?”

“Moon also beams. It’s not a star.”

He had a point, though. I learned in my school that the Moon is not a star. It gets its light from the sun.

“What is it then, Hussain? Another moon?” I asked him.

Hussain knew a lot of things. He was a reader.

“It’s a planet called Venus. As it shines like a star, it’s also called an evening star,” he explained.

“How do you know all this?” I asked him in wonder, though I knew the answer would be books.

But to my surprise, he replied, “My grandma. She taught me these.”

“Where is she?” I asked him, but he didn’t reply. Rather, his eyes were wandering around the night sky.

As a loud gasp pierced the air, I knew that electricity was back.

We sat up on the floor.

“I should go now. If Jalil sir finds out, he will give punishment,” he said, tucking his hands inside the pocket.

I noticed him shivering, as he was only wearing a shirt on that cold December night.

“Don’t you feel cold?” I frowned.

Though he shook his head as in no, I knew he was feeling the chills.

“Wait here, I’m coming back”. Saying that, I ran down the stairs.

I rushed to my room and rummaged through my closet. I was looking for my blue sweater which my mom bought for me once. As it was oversized, I never wore it.

After finding it, I threw it inside a shopping bag, then again headed to the rooftop.

I found Hussain on the edge of the rooftop, waiting for me.

“Here, it’s for you.”

He hesitated a little before taking it, then pulled out the sweater from the bag. “Sweater?” He asked

I nodded, “Do you like it?”

He said nothing, rather he put it on immediately and flashed a smile. “It’s so nice of you Ellie.”

Then he threw his arms around me to give me a tight hug. I hugged him back. Doggo made a jealous sound standing beside us. Hussain then laughed out and leaned down to pet him. “Don’t be mad, silly.”

Hearing a crunching sound, we both look down at the backyard of the orphanage building. We saw Shanto, that big baddy yellow teeth boy who punched Hussain’s face that day. From his posture, no doubt, he snuck out and headed to the other side of the street.

“Where is he going?”

Hussain shrugged. "No idea."

"You should get back before anyone finds out." The children in the orphanage could not roam around after dark. Even in the daytime, they couldn't go outside this block.

I said goodbye to him as he jumped over the railing from our rooftop to the orphanages. I kept standing there until he disappeared inside. But it was scratching my mind — what was Shanto doing, going there at that hour?

November 2018

Areeba locks the door behind her and sits beside me on the bed. I texted her earlier to come over. But when she got there, it's already 12:00. She had class, so it took a while for her to finally arrive.

"I just want to beat the shit out of Aryan," she folds her hand behind her head against the headboard and says, "How dare he leave you at this moment?"

I laugh. Did he leave me? When was the last time he was even there for me I forgot? Our relationship was like an aimless train. And he got off the train a long time ago.

I shake my head. "Our relationship ended a long time ago. It was the last nail on the coffin, Arru."

Areeba rolls her eyes. "I never liked him, anyway. Actually, it's better that he is gone. Have you unfriended him yet?"

"No." I take my phone in my hand and hover over Facebook. As I'm about to unfriend him, I feel an ache in my stomach.

Five years! Five years we had been together. Everything is gone just within a second. We had many wonderful memories as well.

I remember the first day we met after a school event. He came to me timidly and said I looked beautiful; he said I had beautiful eyes that he used to watch from far away. His sister and I used to be in the same school, same class, though we were not friends. Aryan was five years older than me. He was in university when we started our relationship. He used to drop Liza often. That's how he saw me. I remember our first date — we just walked that day in an alley beside the school; we had ice cream from the street afterward. It was all innocent and so simple until it wasn't anymore.

He started ignoring me right after he came back from Australia last year. And now, I know the reason.

He used to be very possessive of me once. He hated the idea of having a guy friend of mine. When I started university last year, he used to pick me up after classes just to show people I belong to him. He had full control over my social media, who would be there and who wouldn't. He had control because I allowed it. I allowed him to breach the privacy of my life because I was too scared of him leaving me. Then that scary thought started crumbling. And one day it was not that scary anymore with all the ignorance, heartache, confusion I had to go through because of him.

Today when I'm sitting here holding the phone in my hand, about to remove him from my friend list, my stomach aches, but the heart doesn't. I'm finally letting him go. I'm finally out of the toxic relationship.

I remove him.

"I hit a rough patch last night with Baba and Aunt Rubina," I tell her.

Her eyes widen, "What happened?"

Then I tell her everything about last night. How Aunt Rubina was judging Raiyan, how my father had done nothing to defend me, and how I

burst out. Areeba keeps listening without interrupting. I tell her about Raiyan as well, the chat we had last evening.

Areeba takes a deep breath, then exhales it. “Okay, now I’m coming to the points one by one.”

She picks up the pillow and wraps her hands around it, pulling it closer to her chest. “Point number one—Your Aunt Rubina is a typical lady. 90% of people in our country think the way she thinks. They are always judging others and forget about all the flaws they are carrying inside. I mean, look at my father, he always mocks me about my weight. And I get depressed for a week each time he mocks me.”

It’s true, her father, Uncle Sharif, always makes fun of her body weight, though she is barely overweight. Her mom always stays alert about her weight because of her husband.

“So, some people always appease their own insecurity by pinpointing others,” she continues, “Now come to your father. He is also a part of that 90%. And talking of the wrong way he handled you when you were a child, I have nothing to say. Until he realizes what he has done to his daughter, no one can do anything. The realization must come from inside. Now Raiyan...,” as she takes his name, she gleams and winks at me. “He is a good guy. I like him already. He cares for you, undoubtedly.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I cough, clearing my throat. “I’m just out of my five-year relationship. So, bad timing.”

“Who is talking about relationships here? Casual dating is fun.”

“I don’t do casual dating Arru, I don’t like the idea of it,” I state the fact.

“How do you know you don’t like something before even trying it? All your life, you were with that douchebag.” She makes a face.

“Raiyan loves a girl from whom he can never get over. I saw it right in his eyes. I don’t want to be someone’s second fiddle.” As I say it, I feel the strength of my voice, “Besides, I don’t know him well. He shared very little about him.”

Areeba laughs out loud at me. “He didn’t even say that he still loves that girl. So until he says it himself, don’t assume things. Besides, the time just hasn’t arrived yet for him to tell all about himself. You guys know each other only for two weeks?”

“Exactly. Then why on earth are we discussing dating him now?” I say, lifting my brows.

“Ellie, I’m just asking you to keep your options open, nothing else. I’m not forcing you either, it’s completely up to you. But he will open up soon. The boy doesn’t seem to be difficult.”

“He is not difficult, of that I’m sure,” I say. I’m amazed to hear the confidence in my tone. I have only known him not for so long, but there is a place of comfort and reliance in my mind I feel about him.

Areeba pulls me towards her, wrapping her arms around me she says, “You know, you have hit the rock bottom, Ellie. From now on, everything will be fine because you are a good person, you deserve it. Trust me.”

I really want to trust her. I really want to trust that everything will become easier for me. A little bit less scary, a little bit less painful. But being a good person doesn’t guarantee you that only good things will happen to you.

Life is like the ocean. Sometimes, there will be sunshine around and harmonious dance in each wave. Then, a time might come when storms are gonna hurl in, crashing everything apart in their way.

Those who keep something to float, survive. Otherwise, the ocean drowns you. I have no idea what to hold to float anymore. Seems like whatever I try to hold, it escapes my hand like water.

My mother was the steadiest holdfast for me for the last twenty-one years, but as she is gone now, I'm trying to catch a breath in the middle of the ocean. I don't know how long I will survive, which reminds me of a saying my mother once said to me, "Life is tough Ellie, but so are you." I laugh in my mind, thinking about it now. I'm tired of staying strong. Drowning seems easier to me than floating.

I come back to the present from my thoughts, hearing a chime on the phone. It's Areeba's.

"Umm, sorry Ellie, I need to leave now."

"But you've just come," I whine.

"I know, but this crazy professor has announced a quiz within an hour, which was not supposed to happen until next Monday." She rolls her eyes with utter annoyance, "So I need to go now."

"Okay. Keep texting me. I'm not feeling good, you know." I throw my hands around her shoulder and give her a tight squeeze.

"I know, honey." She gives me a quick peck on my cheek, picks up her handbag, and leaves.

With her leaving abruptly, I see a long day ahead of me and absolutely nothing to do.

I pick up a book to read but cannot concentrate. I turn on my computer to check if there's anything on Aunt Trisha's online page that needs an update. Nothing.

I open my closet to check if anything needs rearranging and see my camera sitting in front of me, all in its glory.

It's been so long since I have done any proper photography. My eyes go beyond the terrace door, out beyond the clouds. It's a pleasant afternoon and absolutely photo-worthy. I slip into a white top and jeans. Ready to go outside and be the photographer again.

I like fall afternoons as much as I hate summer afternoons. I love the fallen leaves on the street, the soft sunlight, the crisp air, and the smell of flour and jaggery made pitha all-around.

As I'm walking around taking pictures of my surroundings, I start feeling better, too. Nature has a way to fill your mind with its positivity and calmness.

I pass quite a few blocks and find myself near a park-gate named — 'Lakeside Park' written on the gate. There is a carnival going on inside, a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round can be seen from where I'm standing.

I step inside and start walking toward the crowd around the carnival. The park is vast with tall trees, known and unknown. Far away, a wooden bridge can be seen. Children are watching fish in the lake, standing on it.

I look around with a big smile on my face — perfect! It's a perfectly picturesque place to take photos. It's colorful, there are people, everyone is doing something, and everyone seems happy here. Some are eating ice cream, some are standing in a line on the Ferris wheel, some are playing football, some are laughing out loud with a mouth full of food, couples are walking hand in hand, and children are nagging for sweets — it's a burst, full of life. And my hand gets busy taking pictures after pictures.

Leaving the carnival behind, I reach a badminton court around the corner of the park. Getting closer, I find Raiyan and the guy — one of the twins I met at the book signing, playing badminton on the court.

My fingers automatically move to the shutter button. He is looking damn good in a sports outfit. Moving around the court, I click his photos. He notices me as I get closer.

Seeing me, he waves in my direction. I wave back at him. Both of them then walk to me at the edge of the court.

“Following me, huh?” The mischievous Raiyan is back.

I can’t help but laugh, “Yes, Mr. Celebrity.”

“Hi Alif!” I greet the guy beside him.

“You remember my name!”

“Why not?”

“You guys know each other?” Raiyan frowns.

Alif and I, both of us nod. “We met at the book signing. How do you know each other?” Alif asks.

“We’re neighbours,” I say, while Raiyan replies, “We’re friends.”

Alif eyes us confusingly.

“We’re both,” I explain.

He nods.

“So, you are a badminton player?” I ask Raiyan, motioning to his full-on badminton suit.

“He is a two-times champion of the university league,” Alif says proudly. “IBA is the winner of last two years’ badminton champion because of him.”

“IBA?” My brows arch, of course, in surprise. “Smartypants!”

Raiyan laughs at my remarks.

“No, I’m serious. We have met on several occasions and I know so little about you. You continue to surprise me, Raiyan.”

“We have the entire lifetime to know each other, don’t we?” He winks.

I smile.

“Which model is your camera?” Alif asks.

“Canon 600 D.”

“He is a photographer,” Raiyan says, patting Alif’s shoulder.

“Is he?”

“That’s an exaggeration. I have a superb camera. I enjoy taking photos. That’s it.” Alif replies. “Did you take any professional course?”

“No.”

“I took, though. It helps with tricks and angles.”

“That’s great. Share some tips with me sometimes.”

He smiles. “Yeah sure. You are my best friend’s friend. So, it’s my duty,” saying that he bows.

I laugh.

“That’s my boy,” Raiyan says.

“Why don’t you join Ishita over there?” He then points at his sister — the girl with blue streaks — on the audience seat. She is busy with her laptop. “Once we are done with the game, you can show me your photos.”

That’s actually a great offer of help, I can’t deny it. Anything regarding photography and I’m on.

“It’s so nice of you. You guys continue, I’m going over there.”

As I approach the gallery, Ishita looks up. “Hey, it’s you!”

“Yeah, it’s me!” I smile and sit down beside her. “What’s up?”

“I’m good. What about you?” She asks, smiling.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry I left abruptly that day!”

She laughs out and says, “You are a savage, man. That day you just killed him,” she says, patting my shoulder.

Ishita seems friendly. I noticed it that night in the bookstore as well. Not a single gloom anywhere near her face. It’s like she is always in a festive mood. There are some people in the world, for whom devastation is a guest. These people are so strong that even if they swing the sword, they do it like they are playing ping-pong. They are in the driver’s seat of their life, not the other way around.

“When are you gonna help me with my purple streak?” I tease her.

“Anytime you want,” she replies.

“Alif said he would help me with some photography skills.”

“Yeah, he is good at it. You do it as well?” she asks.

I nod. “Yep.”

“I saw from here you guys talking. You know Raiyan?”

“Yeah. He is my neighbour and new friend.”

“That’s great. We have been best friends since we were in middle grade. A close-knit: Raiyan, Alif, and I. My mom adores him like her own son, as he doesn’t share a good bond with his mother. ”

I frown. “Why?” I know this is none of my business, but I’m intrigued to know.

She shrugs. “They were never close, anyway. I have never seen his mother around. His mother has always been to the USA. And he has always been with his grandparents. I asked him about his parents a few times, though. He doesn’t like to talk about them. He is even named after his maternal side — Raiyan Abdullah.”

“His father died. Didn’t he?” I ask her.

Narrowing her eyes, Ishita says, “Who told you? He never told us that. In fact, we know nothing about his father.”

I bite my lips. I know how it feels when you hear something that you should hear from the person himself. “I was just guessing. That’s it. Your friend seems like a really good person,” I say to change the topic.

A soft smile appears on her lips. “I know.”

“He seems to be good at so many things. Raiyan.”

Ishita laughs. “He is. Jack of all trades!”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. He plays badminton. He knows cooking. He writes for SHOUT. He travels a lot. A student of God damn IBA and here I am, his best friend who doesn’t even know how to apply for scholarships!”

“What kind of scholarship?”

She shrugs. “You know, after my graduation, I want to study abroad. For that, I need a scholarship. That’s manageable by emailing the professor with whom my interest would match. But I’m clueless here and lost.”

“I guess I can help you with that,” I said, because I really can. Last year, I made a complete excel sheet for Areeba. She also wants to study abroad for her Post-grad. So, I researched all the Unis from Europe and North America. I made a list containing the preferred professor’s email addresses.

Seeing the perplexed look on Ishita, I explain, “I helped my cousin last year by making an excel sheet containing professors’ info for her. I can do that for you if you want.”

Hearing me, her eyes widen. “Seriously? Will you do that for me?”

I smile, “Of course. I would be happy to help.”

She throws her arms around my neck and hugs me. Squeezing me tight, she says, “I’m sure God has sent you to me. I have no idea how I would

thank you.”

I laugh. “You don’t have to thank me.”

She releases me from her hold. “It’s my dream, you know — studying abroad. This is the only thing I have ever wanted. But my parents can’t afford it, so I’m looking for a scholarship.”

“And I believe you will get it. Let me know your preferred subject area. I will start working on it once I get back home today.”

She takes my hand in her hand and gives it a firm squeeze. “Thank you again.”

Ferris Wheel

“Are you sure you saw him going inside this house?” Hussain asked.

“Yes. This one,” I replied, pointing at the age-old, grey-stoned house.

That abandoned house stood there alone with no other buildings around. It’s just a block away from our house. A giant Oak Tree stood by the building, swaying in the wind. It was known as the spooky bungalow. The richest family in the area once occupied the property. After all of them committed suicide, no one bought it. Since then, it’s been empty without inhabitants.

I always wanted to get inside the house, but all of my school friends were scared to even go near. One day, while coming back from school, I saw Shanto getting inside. Then often I used to see him either getting inside or coming outside. So, we were on a secret mission that day. The mission to find out what was Shanto’s business there.

“Let’s get inside,” Hussain said.

Crossing the weedy and muddy front yard, we stopped by the front door. There was no lock. The door creaked when Hussain opened it.

Getting inside, we found ourselves in an empty living room. Cobwebs were hanging from the ceiling and the curtains on the windows were ripped. The air inside was heavy with a rusty and wet wood smell. Everything was covered with a carpet of dust.

“We should check all the rooms before there’s still light outside,” Hussain said, with his eyes scanning the room.

I nodded. Though I was never afraid of ghosts, I still had no interest in staying inside a haunted house after dark. Besides, I promised Nirjhor Bhai that I would get back by 6:00 p.m. We went to the children’s park with him that afternoon, as always.

The house was not that big. We were done with checking all the rooms, except one. The master bed. The master bed was where the suicides had taken place, I heard.

Pushing the door open, we got inside the bedroom. The room was not as empty as the other rooms. There was a broken desk and chair in a corner. I noticed some damp cigarettes on the floor.

“Do you think Shanto smokes here?” I asked Hussain, pointing at the cigarettes.

“I don’t know. Never saw him smoking.”

“Next time, we should follow him.”

“Yeah. Let’s go back.”

As we stepped outside the bedroom and came back again in the living room, we heard someone’s footsteps approaching on the driveway.

“Someone’s coming!” I whispered.

“We should not get caught. If someone from the orphanage sees me here, there will be trouble.”

“I saw a back door in the kitchen. Let’s use that one,” saying that, I grabbed Hussain’s hand and rushed to the kitchen.

We heard the creaking sound of the front door opening. From the kitchen, I could see a side of the living room. Before stepping outside through the back door, I looked back once and got a glimpse of the intruder. As we were in a hurry, I saw the backside of a tall man wearing a black cloak. It was definitely not Shanto.

We then ran through the backyard and didn’t stop until we reached the street. Stopping by the sidewalk, I then let out a sigh of relief. “I saw the backside of a person.”

“Who is it, any guess?” He asked.

“It’s not Shanto. It’s someone a lot older than us. He was wearing a cloak. Same type of cloak that the teachers from your orphanage wear.”

He frowned. “A teacher?”

“Do they give secret punishment in the orphanage?” I asked him.

“What do you mean by secret punishment?”

“I don’t know. I’m wondering if Shanto is being secretly punished by a teacher over there. You know, locking himself in a haunted house alone? Like my Baba does to me, he gives me punishment by locking me inside a dark bathroom,” I replied.

“No. not that I know of.”

“Okay. Next time we will follow him,” I became more confident in my decision. *If we would catch him sneaking around the haunted house smoking or doing any other thing, we could have used that against him. That boy was very rude to everyone.*

November 2018:

“Wanna ride this giant?” Ishita asks, pointing at the Ferris Wheel. After our little chat in the gallery, Ishita, Alif, and I came to see the carnival in the park. Raiyan left as he had class.

I gauge the Ferris-Wheel top to bottom, counting its height. I have acrophobia. My head spins if I look down from up high. “Ummm... I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to get into this... I’m afraid of heights,” I say.

But she doesn’t seem to be in an agreeing mood, rather she holds my hand and starts dragging me through the line, “It will be fun. Trust me. I was once acrophobic too. But facing the fear head to head, helps,” she says, “Besides, I’m gonna hold you tight, don’t worry.” She smiles.

But I don’t. Rather, I panic. I’m so not ready to face my fear head to head.

I yelp and say, “You go on.” I sound like a child who doesn’t want to go to school today. But she brushes it off like a parent. “It’s downright fun. The wind up there is mind-blowing, right Alif?”

Alif shakes his head, “You guys go on. I’m gonna take some photos.” Saying that, he turns around and blends into the crowd.

I give up. She buys two tickets and we climb into the box, and it starts moving, so does my head. I grip her hand tightly. She laughs. “Give it a minute, you will be fine. You have never been on a Ferris wheel before?”

I shake my head. I’m trying to stay still. If I move, the box moves too. I have even forgotten to blink. Ishita seems more than okay like she is enjoying it in full swing.

“If you don’t try, how’d you know the fun part of it?” She has sounded just like Areeba now. “Try to relax. You won’t die. Even if you die, it will be quick.” She says the last sentence with so much confidence as if the grim reaper had called and personally assured her about it.

“Are you alright?” Ishita keeps asking me as I’m retching beside the Ferris wheel as soon as we’re off it.

“I’m bringing water.” Alif rushes to a food stall.

“Do you have any tissues?” I ask Ishita.

She looks into her bag and fishes out a tissue packet right away. “Here.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, too weak from the puking to talk out loud.

Alif arrives with a bottle of water. “Drink it. You will feel better.” I finish the entire bottle in two gulps. “Do you want to sit somewhere?” He asks.

I shake my head, “No. I should go home.”

“You got sick. Rest a little in our house. It’s right across the street, then we’ll drop you home. Don’t worry.”

Their house is really just across the street, opposite the park. It’s an apartment building with ten floors. Theirs is on the seventh floor.

“Have it, Ellie. You will feel much better. Lemon juice helps to cut the sickness.” She sits beside me on the sofa handing me over a glass of lemon juice mixed with mint, Mrs. Daisy Mahmud; Ishita, and Alif’s mother. She is extremely pretty and looks a few years younger than her age. She has a familiar warmth all over her face, like afternoon sunshine, soft and calming. It’s the motherly warmth.

“Thank you.” I smile at her and finish the drink right away. She is right. Once it reaches my stomach, I feel better.

“Better now?” Aunt Daisy asks me.

I grin at her, “A lot better.”

She smiles and gives me a pat on my shoulder. “I’m coming back in a minute.” She rises from the sofa and leaves with the glass.

I don’t see Ishita and Alif around. They told me to be seated here for a few minutes and went inside. I look around the living room. They matched the color of the wall with the furniture — all white.

There is an entire wall full of family photos. I get up from the sofa and check it. Some are black and white and some are color printed. In a photo, little Ishita is pulling Alif’s hair and Alif seems to be downright irritated. In another photo, the whole family is standing in front of the Parliament House and smiling.

From the photos here, I get a vibe that they are a less-complicated, somewhat happy family. Not like mine, which was bleak and horrible.

“Nice photos we have, don’t we?” I turn around and see Alif smiling, standing beside me.

“No doubt,” I smile back at him.

“Let’s see your photos?” He asks. I then notice the laptop under the fold of his arm.

I nod, “Sure.”

We sit on the couch and pass him the memory card. As he inserts it into the slot, the files open. He clicks on the most recent photo I shot. It’s a photo of the sun sinking behind the clouds in a bloodshot sky, with a flock of birds flying back to their nest. He then keeps checking all the photos but

says absolutely nothing. His mouse cursor stops on a photo of a street girl selling flowers.

I remember the moment I captured the photo. It was a fine afternoon. I went to Ramna park with Areeba. There was a little girl not over eight years old, sitting beside the sidewalk of the park, frustrated, hands full of flower necklaces. Apparently, not a single piece of the necklaces had been sold. As I approached the girl, suddenly her eyes flickered with hope and a smile spread over her lips as she looked upward at me. That's the moment — I captured it with my camera.

“Ellie!” Alif says, his cursor still fixed on the girl's photo, “You are brilliant!” He says under his breath.

I laugh. He then faces me, “You are incredible, you know that? Where did you learn it?” He asks, still looking taken aback.

I shrug, “Nowhere.” Then Ms. Andrea Hoffman appears in my mind. I wish I could learn it from her. I sigh.

“Why are you being sad?” He frowns.

“Nothing. It's just that I wanted to do an internship with Andrea Hoffman. You know her?” I ask him.

He nods, “Of course, I do. People who love photography know her.”

“Well, I wish I could have learned it from her, so that's the sigh about.”

He places the laptop on the coffee table and turns to me, “You are naturally skilled, Ellie. Every emotion of people you have captured, it's mind-blowing. It's like they are talking through your photos.”

I shake my head, “Okay, you are exaggerating.”

“I'm not,” his voice is firm. “Why don't you go for the internship?”

I laugh out, “I'll get rejected. And I don't think I'm gonna like it.”

“You are so sure that you’ll get rejected?” He then throws his hands in the air, “Trying isn’t gonna ruin you. Go for it. Apply.”

Ishita arrives holding a tray full of snacks and orange juice, Aunt Daisy behind her.

“What’s going on?” Ishita asks, placing the tray on the coffee table.

Alif then turns the laptop to her so that she can see it. Aunt Daisy also leans in to have a look.

As Alif keeps sliding through the photos, Ishita throws me the look when you are proud of someone.

“Ma Sha Allah,” Auntie says, sitting next to me.

“Ellie, all of them are beautiful,” Ishita says as the slideshow ends.

I smile, “Thanks.”

“I was suggesting her to try for Andrea Hoffman,” Alif says, turning the laptop off.

“Who is she?” Ishita says, wrinkling her nose. “Sorry, I don’t do photography. So if she is a famous person in this department, I don’t know her.”

“It’s fine,” I reply. “She is a renowned photographer who offers an internship. But my photos are not that good to bag this internship.” I state the fact.

Alif again looks disappointed, “You never know unless you try.”

“Yep,” Ishita says, agreeing with her brother. “Here’s what we can do,” her voice turns into a serious tone. “We all will go on a daily photography session with you in different places. And then you will send them to Ms. Andrea Hoffman. It will be fun.”

Well, it actually sounds nice. It will shift my mind from all those recent incidents. And about applying? I’ll see that later.

I nod at her, “Deal.” Both of the siblings smile at me.

Seeing the food in front of me, suddenly I feel hungry. My stomach growls. I take the patties from the plate. Alif and Ishita take sandwiches.

“Where do you live in this neighborhood?” Aunt Daisy asks me.

Before I can reply, Alif does me the favor, “Right next to Raiyan’s.”

“Who else do you have in your family?” She asks me.

The question is not an unfamiliar one, but as I think of the answer now, it has changed. And for the first time after my mother’s death, I have faced the question, “My father and my aunt,” I reply.

“Oh! and your mother?” She asks me again.

“She passed away two months ago,” and there it is. The newly formatted reply to an ever-known query.

All three of them have stopped eating and watching me with sadness in their eyes, maybe looking for a word to say to a girl whose mother passed away not so long ago. “Hey, I’m doing fine. Don’t look so grim,” I say, smiling.

Aunt Daisy scoots closer to me, takes me into her arms, and rubs the back of my head. I look at Ishita and Alif sitting in front of me and suddenly find them extremely lucky to still have a mother around.

“And this is my room,” Ishita is giving me a home tour and after showing me all the other rooms in the house, now we have arrived at her territory.

Her room is cozy and a little bit messy— a total opposite of the rest of the house. Books are stacked on her reading desk, beside her bed on the nightstand, and obviously, the bookshelf is overloaded with not only books, but you will also find jewelry, packets of gums, hair brushes and so many

other things. Although everything is messy here, this room has life. It talks and doesn't contain a glimpse of gloom like Ishita.

I sit on the edge of her bed, and she is clearing off a couch, which was hidden underneath a pile of clothes.

"Sorry, I'm kinda messy. I hate organizing things," she grins at me, saying that.

"You don't have to fold your clothes right now because I'm here. It's your room, your territory," I smile at her to not make her ashamed of her room.

But she seems to be far away from being ashamed, rather she throws the clothes in a corner of the room and sits on the couch, resting her hands on the arms of the couch and stretching her legs forward, "I like you. You are kind of non-judgemental type." She says.

I laugh. How can I be judgmental by being judged all my life? "What made you think so?"

She shrugs. "You are not mad at me for forcing you to ride the Ferris wheel, salt was missing in the patties but you didn't complain rather ate it. Your face didn't twitch, stepping inside my room, which seems like a war zone. And you are comfortably seated on my bed," she says, "I have a friend who once came here and hadn't stayed over thirty minutes. Another one started folding my clothes as soon as she was here."

"And those are your friends?"

She seems confused. "Yeah?"

"Friends don't judge."

"Trust me, they do," she says, making a frustrating face.

I shake my head, "Then they are not your friends."

She becomes quiet. Probably considering my statement.

“I have very few friends,” I continue, “Two or three on top. None of them have ever judged me for anything. I used to be called slut in school.”

Ishita’s eyes widened. “That’s horrible,” she says.

“I know. I used to be called slut because my parents got divorced. My mother and I moved to a one-bedroom apartment. We didn’t own a car anymore. I didn’t have a new school bag each year. I got 4 out of 100 on the math exam, which turned me into a role model who can do nothing right. I dared to write a letter to my crush, and he showed it off to everyone in the school — all of these were not shameful things for me but for a few of my friends, it was. A lot of friends left me back then. But few stayed and they are still in my life.” I smile at her, seeing her jaw-dropping a bit.

She yelps, “That was cruel!”

I nod, “It was. But I had learned a great lesson back then. So, tell me, how can I be judgmental?” I say, placing my hand underneath my chin.

“But look at you now—you look calm and collected,” she says, moving her gaze around my face.

I chuckle, “Trust me Ishita. I’m far away from the last statement you have just given.”

She says nothing, rather keeps reading me. “How do you know Raiyan? I had seen him running after you, on the night of the book signing,” she asks me suddenly.

I straighten my back now, “You know he is my neighbour. So he invited me.”

“He just doesn’t go around and invite his neighbours,” her brows get lifted, “And even if he did, he wouldn’t get so tense that he would run after his neighbour after that incident, because this kind of thing is quite normal in book-signing, writers get moody and fans lose their nerves. Raiyan is

used to it — digesting his uncle's fan's disappointment," she says, wandering her eyes on my face.

I cough up to clear my throat, "Well, it happened."

She nods, "I see. He hates me for the fact that I used to have a crush on him."

"Used to have a crush? Have you moved on?" I ask.

"Obviously. It was just a short-term crush. I mean, come on, who wouldn't have a crush on Raiyan Abdullah? But I would never get into a relationship with him."

"Why? You said he is a good person?"

"Yes. He is, in fact, a wonderful human being. But he is not good at keeping a romantic relationship, you know. He dated a few but got into a serious relationship only once with a friend from our common circle and I don't date friend's exes. Tania was very much invested in the relationship, but he was not. Anyway, I have a boyfriend now," she says.

Her mentioning of dating a friend makes me curious. "What about now? Does Raiyan have a girlfriend?"

She nods, "Not anymore. Tania — his ex-girlfriend," her face twitches up, saying the girl's name, "They dated for six months. After the break-up, that bitch started dating another friend of Raiyan. Though it doesn't bother him."

That's a lot of information at once. But the girl Tania sounds awful? Dating the friend of her ex is definitely not nice. No wonder he was talking so rudely that day over the phone. But Raiyan said- the girl he loves had saved his life or Tania is the other girl who ruined his life?

"He had other girlfriends?" I ask Ishita.

“Nope. Only one. That’s Tania. He has trust issues around women.” She replies, “Why do you ask?”

I shrug it off. “Just curious.”

I *am* curious now. Who is the one who saved his life, and who is the one who ruined his life? Dating an ex’s friend is kind of unacceptable, but that definitely is not enough to ruin one’s life. And Raiyan doesn’t appear to be a person who would be so damned about it to phrase this like ruining life.

“Raiyan must like you, Ellie,” Ishita says, pulling me out from some kind of trance.

“Huh? Is it so?” I say.

She nods, “Yep. Otherwise, he wouldn’t let you in so easily. He is guarded about dating people. And you seem to be a good one. That explains his interest.” She smiles softly while saying that.

“We are not dating.”

“Who knows what the future holds?” She winks.

It was around 9:00 p.m and both of them walked me home. I invited them to come inside but they denied it as they have term exams tomorrow to prepare for.

Right now, I’m curled up comfortably on my patio chair on the terrace, enjoying the softly glowing moon, the cool breeze around, and the peace in my mind. Coming back home, I opened an excel sheet for Ishita after she sent her preferred subject and university list.

My phone chimes. It’s a text from Raiyan — *how are you now?*

His text brings an instant smile to my face. I type back right away — *better than ever.*

He doesn't reply. Rather, he appears next to my terrace on his balcony, his hands tucked inside his pocket, smiling at me, "I'm less worried for you then, that you are better now."

"Did you see the moon? Who wouldn't feel good by looking at her?" I tell him, motioning to the moon. It's shining brighter now, shimmering everything around in a silver light with its soft glow. He turns around and faces the moon. I look at him. He looks so serene in the moonlight.

It's a wonder how fast things change. Last night, I was screaming, and devastated and tonight it's a totally different story. I'm far from feeling desolated, rather for the first time in a while I feel somewhat happy. My heart feels content. Probably, I've started finding the bits of my "something" to stay afloat in the ocean, called- life.

The Sunflower Field

November 2018

I keep clicking my shutter, moving around the woman who is selling bangles sitting under the streetlamp, whereas Ishita and Alif are busy convincing a little girl to allow me to take a photo of her holding a sparkler who was busy collecting waste a moment ago.

“Are you one of those people from the newspaper who takes our photos and then prints them?” Feroza, the bangle-selling lady, asks me.

I move the camera from my eyes and hold it down. “No. I’m not. I just like taking photos of people.”

She seems surprised. “No one took photos of us for no reason. We are poor. We don’t wear good clothes. Then what fun are you getting by clicking my photos?”

I sigh.

I get near her and drop myself beside her. “It’s not about nice dresses. I like the expression on your face when you get to sell a pair of bangles.

That's it." I smile, saying to her.

But she doesn't understand what I meant. Though she doesn't ask me further questions. I then buy four sets of bangles. For Areeba, Ishita, Aunt Trisha, and Aunt Rubina. Yes, Aunt Rubina who supposedly doesn't like me that much, and the feeling is mutual. My equation with her is quite interesting at this moment.

Unfortunately, we both are helpless in this situation. We have to tolerate each other. Though she tried to sabotage my recent drama-free life in some ways like- pinching me by telling her daughter knows cooking better than anyone (me) else, my mother has absolutely failed to teach me anything. I baked a pizza one day, and she went on the whole day complaining about the pizza.

I left my shoes once beside the main door, and she kept yelling about it for straight fifteen minutes. The list can go on and on.

What is my reaction usually? Nothing. Sometimes, I act like she doesn't exist. I felt like giving her some fitting reply while she said that my mother hadn't taught me anything, then I refrained myself because who doesn't know how to talk about a dead person in front of her daughter, doesn't deserve a reply. But she is not all the way a bad person either. No one actually can be pure evil, I believe. We human beings are painted in grey. She sometimes warms up food for me. I sometimes make tea for her; she talks about her childhood memories as well, and I listen to her patiently. One thing my tumultuous family life was successful in teaching me for sure, is- being patient. So, this is how my equation has turned out with my aunt- nonchalant.

On the other hand, my father is extremely busy as usual with his work. When he is not at home, he is working; when he is at home, he is working.

We talk sometimes during dinner. Just a chit chat about my education and future goals. That's all we talk about. But quite surprisingly, the habit of him shaming me has gone down significantly since my mother's illness. That's more noticeable nowadays here, as I live 24/7 with him.

"Tonight when you go back home, the first thing you will do is- apply for the internship," Alif says, as clear as water.

I nod, taking a bite from my burger. We are now at the Burger King, eating french fries and burgers. Alif and Ishita somehow convinced me to apply. I have clicked more photos in the last few weeks than ever. So I think I'm ready now. "I will do it," I say.

"You will send us the screenshot of your *applied successfully* thing, we don't believe you," says Ishita.

I laugh out loud. "No need for that. I will definitely apply."

But she shakes her head, "That's not a request, it's a command."

"Okay, I'll take a screenshot. Happy now?"

She seems pleased now and her concentration goes back to the burger.

"All the photos look great! I'm sure you won't regret sending the application Ellie," Alif says, checking the photos on his laptop.

I yelp. Because I'm not sure about the regretting part. I just know that I'm going to take a shot at it while living my life as if an application never went from my side until I get feedback from Ms. Andrea Hoffman.

"So, Ellie, we are going for a holiday in our country house on 31st December," Ishita says, chewing her burger. "Do you want to come with us? All of our friends are going."

"We do this every year," Alif speaks up, shutting down his laptop, "And now is a perfect time. The weather is cold. It's fun, trust me," Alif says.

Ishita nods. “Yeah. We do bar-b-q, play games, bonfires and all. And the village is beautiful. Especially during wintertime. My uncle and aunt look after the house for us.”

Well, this sounds exciting. Besides, I’ve never been outside Dhaka with friends before. But the real problem is managing my father. He’ll create an issue if I say that I want to go with them. Thinking that I sink a little into the chair.

“I want to go. Really. But it’s difficult to convince Baba. I don’t know if he will agree or not.” I sink more in my chair and my shoulder drops a bit.

“Don’t worry about that, Ellie,” Alif says. “We’ll convince uncle, right Ishita?”

“Yes,” Ishita nods, “We are very much experts in that area. Did that a lot for our other friends.” She winks.

I smile. This sounds good. But yet, I’m not hopeful 100%. “Okay. That’s great. Who else is coming?”

“We are not confirmed yet. Raiyan comes along every year,” she says, shooting me a devilish smile. I pretend like I didn’t get the underlying meaning of her smile. “And some other friends of ours. His ex-Tania also always used to come. I’m not sure if she will this year.”

“You guys are close?” I ask.

“Who, Tania?” Alif asks back, confused.

“Yep.”

“Not so close. But we all share a common friend circle,” he replies.

“I see.” Tania is going or not that doesn’t bother me. If I will be able to go, that’s the question. I have plenty of time left, though, to convince my father. December 31st is still a few weeks away.

As I push open the door of aunt Rubina's room, I find her talking to someone over the phone. I have noticed her talking over the phone frequently nowadays. And whenever she sees me, she ends the call. What's the secrecy? I mean her husband died a long time ago, so if she is talking to someone, why get shy about it, that too, in front of her niece?

"I'll call you later," she says, seeing me standing in the doorway, and ends the call as usual. She waves me to come inside.

"I have brought something for you," I say. "I thought you would like it." I pass her the wrapped bangles.

She eyes me quizzically before taking it. As she unwraps the bangle and the shiny stoned metal glitters before her, it stuns her. She frowns, looking at the pair of bangles. "For me?" she asks.

I nod, in confirmation.

"Okay," she seems quite taken aback. "Thank you."

"Do you like it?" I ask her because I really don't have any idea about her style. Only that, she likes to wear saree and stays simple.

"It's really pretty," she says.

"Okay, I'm relieved that you liked it. I was confused."

"No. it matches my style."

Well, then. Problem solved. "Ok. Goodnight then." I turn around, heading to my room.

After coming back to my room, the first thing I did was turn on my laptop and directly go to Andrea Hoffman's webpage. I have filled out all my details in the information section, uploaded my portfolio, and now as I'm

sitting on my bed, with my laptop open in front of me, holding my breath, I'm only a click away from the *apply now* button.

And I do it.

I click on the red button and exhale the deep breath I was holding back.

You have applied successfully. A green colour text flashes up on the laptop screen. I keep staring at it a little while before taking the screenshot for Ishita and Alif.

I shut the laptop off and send the screenshot to both of them.

Yayyy. You did it. Now sit tight and enjoy the ride. Ishita replied in text.

Don't you dare to forget us when you become a celebrity photographer.

Alif replies.

I let Areeba and Raiyan know, shooting a text.

I'm sure in some families, people let their parents know about such a huge step which matters so much to them. But as mine is different, I don't bother to let my father know about this application. He will probably mock me if I share it with him. If he was the previous version of himself, then he would have broken my camera by now. He has changed a lot over the years. Probably, if he would break the camera this time, if he wouldn't change, then I would have left the house as the little self of mine wanted to.

"Do you want to see the sunflower field?" He asks me.

But here, I'm thinking if I should go with him. I love him a lot. I like it when he brings me candy; I like it when he plays with me; I like it when he

feeds me with his hand and tells a lot of fairytale stories. But I don't like to go to the fields or to the children's park or on a boat ride with him.

Sometimes, He behaves so strange and hurts me so much that I feel like screaming yet I don't. Because he told me once that, if I scream when he does those weird things to me, my mom and dad would kill him. I don't want him to be killed. He is actually very nice to me and far better than my father even if he hurts me sometimes. Though, I told him several times that he hurt me; he said that it's not hurt. Once I get older, I'll understand.

We're seated on a stone behind a tree on the edge of the sunflower field now. He said he would be hurt if I didn't come with him, so I came. I'm on his lap and he is chewing gum. A big eagle has just flown over our head. I can see its shadow over the trees.

It's a quiet afternoon. My mom and dad were sleeping when we left for the field. We came here a few days ago on summer vacation. The school is closed, so my parents decided to visit their hometown.

While he is chewing gum and slips his hand underneath my dress, I try not to think how much it hurts when he does this. Rather, my mind wanders back to Hussain.

I haven't heard from him for six months now. Every day, I check my mom's phone at least a million times. Is he mad at me? He promised me he would call every day. How can he forget all about me? I miss our afternoon playtime. I miss talking to him. I miss crying to him.

I wish I could tell him now that I'm hurting because the man I'm sitting with runs his fingers all over my body which I so much hate. If Hussain was here, he would have understood. Seems like only he used to understand me, no one else. Now, with him gone, I feel all alone.

I look up at the sky to find God there. Though my mom said God is everywhere, I saw people make a prayer looking skyward to God when they feel like crying. Right now, I feel like crying. A teardrop escapes my eyes. I wipe it off with the back of my palm. I will never talk to Hussain if he ever calls me.

“Ellie, spread your legs,” he says. I do as he asks.

I lay down on the stone, and he goes down there under my dress, between my legs. He does something with his tongue. And it feels so disgusting I hit him with my feet. As I continue hitting him, he grabs my legs with his one hand and starts unzipping his pants.

Why is he unzipping it? I look at his face and he looks so strange. He seems mad at me. Suddenly, I feel like running away from here. He takes his pants off half down. Now, he starts taking off his red underwear. What does he want to do?

“I want to go home,” suddenly panic surges me.

“Shhh...Stay quiet.” He warns me.

I hit him hard on his leg seeing the thing that comes out after his underwear glides off. I don't want to see that thing ever again, I'm feeling so scared right now that I want to shove him off and run away.

And I do. I kick him in the joint of his leg hard, I sit up and scratch on his face. He falls on the ground screaming out. I take the chance of his imbalance, releasing myself from his grip and starts running through the field without looking back.

I keep running and running. I hear him calling my name from behind. I see a jungle on the other end of the field. If I manage to hide there, he won't probably be able to find me.

I start running faster. I won't stop now. I won't ever stop. I just want to run. Run far away from here.

I look upward to find God. I know he can see me. I know he is seeing me running over the field. I know he knows I'm scared, hurt, and distraught. Because He is everywhere.

As I flip open my eyes, laying on my bed in my room, I find tears rolling down my cheeks. I sit up hurriedly and raise my feet to check. It's all okay now. It was just another nightmare. None of it is happening right at this moment. I place my hand over my chest, as it wants to jump out.

Why can't I just leave it all behind and live in the present?

Why do those things still bother me? I'm not the little Ellie anymore, I'm not the same girl I used to be. It's all far behind me or is it?

I'm carrying this garbage over my shoulder for so long. The more I try to shake it off, the more it starts stretching its wings and clutching me.

My hand is trembling as I start dialing Raiyan's number. I don't know why I have just dialed his number but I feel like talking to him, I want him to receive the phone and hear me out.

"Hello," he picks up at the fifth ring. His voice is drowsy, from sleeping. It's past two a.m in the morning.

"Raiyan," my voice is shaking from the sob that is coming up from my chest.

"What happened? Are you okay?" He sounds worried right now.

I wipe my eyes again with the back of my hand, "Raiyan." I can't speak. I'm unable to speak as I start sobbing like a madwoman. I feel something melting in my heart that wants to come out as tears from my eyes. My face

is blazing and my head hurts while I feel like my chest can fall open anytime.

“Ellie,” his voice is soft and calm but he doesn’t say anything except my name, allowing me to cry my heart out.

“Ellie, do you want me to come over?” He asks as I slow down a bit.

“You ca-an’t, it’s la-ate,” I mumble.

“I will sneak in, if you want,” he says, hesitantly.

But I can’t do that. I don’t want to risk it.

If my father finds out, it will be a big issue. Boys are never allowed at night time. Besides, I don’t want him to be painted wrong in my father’s eyes. He just lives next door.

“It’s okay Raiyan. You don’t have to come over.” I reply though I *want* him to come over here but I just don’t want him to be in any kind of awkward situation for me.

“Turn your video on,” he says. “I want to see you.”

I do as he says. My face is all red as I can see myself in the camera. I see his worried face when he accepts the video call request. He is seated on his bed upright.

“What happened Ellie?” He asks me, clearing his throat. I can feel my eyes well up with tears again as he speaks.

“Is it Aryan? He called you?” He asks. His jaw clenches when he asks me.

I shake my head. “It’s not Aryan. I had a nightmare.”

Now, I don’t know how he would react as it was just a nightmare. I wish it was *just* a nightmare for me too like all the other people have it. But it is not. It’s my reality that sometimes pops up in my dreams.

Raiyan doesn't seem any less relieved while I've just mentioned that it was a nightmare. Which makes me feel comfortable somehow. He asks me in the same anxious tone as he asked just a few seconds ago, "What type of nightmare? Do you want to talk about it?"

Do I want to talk about it? I did talk about it though, a long time ago, with my mom. She was always there to hold me whenever I used to have these nightmares. But I'm not sure if I want to talk about my dreams/ reality with Raiyan now. I don't know how he would interpret these. You can't really interpret these things unless you, yourself went through it. Moreover, I don't want to relive those memories again right at this moment.

"I want to tell you, Raiyan. But not now. I'm not ready." I tell him.

He nods in understanding. "I wish I could come over right now."

And to my surprise, I reply to him, "I wish it too. I really need someone to hold on to me now". I take a pause, before talking again, "All my life, my mom was there to soothe me whenever I had those nightmares. My nightmares are real, Raiyan. It happened to me when I was just a child."

His brows furrow. His eyes are scanning my face, looking for answers. But he doesn't ask questions. Instead, he remains quiet and exhales a deep sigh. We both fall quiet. Me— wiping tears every now and then, him— watching me helplessly.

"Can you try to sleep? Keep the video on. I'm right here. I'll watch over you." He says.

"No. That's fine. You should go back to sleep now. I'll be fine."

"Ellie, I'm not asking you whether I would watch over you now. Because, even if you say no, I'm gonna do it. I can't just end the call and go back to sleep peacefully." He pauses, then says, "Try to get some sleep. I'll be here."

Realizing that he is not going to move, I nod. “Thank you, Raiyan.”

“Shhh... never say thanks to me. Close your eyes now.” He smiles. And I shut my eyes.

Dancing Water

There was a wooden chair on the balcony in our living room. My mom was seated there.

Her head leaned against the grill of the balcony, her long hair spread all over her back while the moonlight had fallen on her face, making her look like a silver fairy lost in some other world. I used to find her a lot of nights, sitting there, looking outside with the same sadness in her eyes I had seen the other day in Hussain's. Sometimes when her cheeks glistened in the moonlight, I knew she had been crying. She used to cry in silence, never in front of me.

I tiptoed through the room and stood by the door of the balcony. She moved her eyes from outside at me. She was crying.

She wiped her face at once, seeing me standing by the door. "You haven't slept yet?"

"I was thirsty," I said.

She rose from the chair and came out of the balcony, locking the door behind her. I followed her through the living room to the dining. She then

poured me a glass of water from the jug kept on the dining table. The food dishes were still on the table. Mom hadn't moved those into the fridge yet. She didn't have dinner either. How would she? Baba had hurt mom a lot that night. Like he used to do now and then.

Drinking water, I swayed a little back to have a glimpse of their bedroom. The TV was still on top of the wardrobe, but a broken one. There was a hole where the screen was supposed to be. The glasses shattered all over the wardrobe and the floor when I heard glass shattering and ran over there.

I found Baba screaming at mom holding the hammer in his hand, with which he broke the TV, no he hadn't hit my mom, and he never did that. All he used to do was fight with her, screaming at her while mom kept sitting in a corner dumbfounded like that night. I fled the moment baba glared at me. I got terrified seeing baba angry. He had a tendency either to break things, yell at mom or beat me.

“You really had a tough childhood, Maa,” Sarah says.

I nod. “I had. I always used to pray to God so that my parents would stop fighting. I hated seeing my mom crying, sitting on that chair on the balcony. Once I asked her to run away. She replied, ‘The night gets darkest right before dawn. Everything will get better one day. Your Baba will calm down one day. He will stop fighting. There is a kind soul hidden inside of him.’”

I sigh. “But back then, I used to believe that even if the sun rises, the night gathers eventually. I knew- nothing would get better because I had been praying for a long time, and nothing changed.”

“And now? What do you believe?” Sarah asks.

“I believe that this is life—night will gather and the sun will rise. We can’t expect only good things from life.”

I pause. Then tell her, “The thing I didn’t know—why it was so difficult for my father to love someone; to love mom, to love me, to love Doggo. Why was it so tough for him to make mom happy? Why he never hugged my mom after their fight and wiped her tears away as mom used to do to me. Mom could never stay mad at someone for long, me neither. For me, it’s easier to love than hating.”

As mom went to bed, I went back to my room. After using the washroom, I went to the balcony to wipe my hands on the towel. My eyes got stuck on a figure in the orphanage’s backyard. It was two in the morning and someone was sneaking around at this hour of the night?

I was thinking it’s probably Shanto. To get a better look, I widened my eyes. I was stunned to see Hussain’s face under the porch light. He disappeared inside through the back door.

Suddenly, I felt so mad at him. We were on this secret mission together. How could he sneak around in the middle of a night without informing me? Did he go back to that house? Of course he did. Where would he go then? I planned to ask him first thing in the morning.

November 2018

Quite surprisingly, Aryan texted me a few times, basically apologizing for the way things ended between us. But I didn’t reply. I don’t think I will ever reply.

“You should reply to him though, thank him for the eye-opening,” Raiyan said, jokingly this morning, during our badminton practice.

“He doesn’t deserve a reply and I should be slapped,” I said.

“Slapped for what?”

“For allowing him to control my life.”

“Go easy on yourself, girl,” he said by flashing his famous grin.

Raiyan and I grew closer in the last few days. I help him with his badminton practice; he helps me with university math as I’m going to take a math course in my upcoming semester.

“You will be an expert by the time you start your math course next semester,” he said.

We take our math sessions at his place, which made me a frequent visitor over there recently. Nana Bhai and I (Raiyan’s grandfather, I call him Nana Bhai as well) chat a lot about books and writers.

He gave me a tour of his home-library and it’s huge. The length of the bookshelves is from floor to ceiling, and each corner of the room is packed with books from different genres. Nana Bhai sometimes talks about his late wife as well, that he misses her. Raiyan’s grandmother actually raised him. She passed away a few years ago from heart failure. I never heard of Nana Bhai talking about his children, though. But he seems very proud of his grandson-Raiyan. The way Raiyan has taken the responsibility of the house, the bookstore and, not to mention- him.

“He is a gem—Raiyan. God has made his heart out of gold, Ellie. The boy had struggled a lot in life,” he once said to me about Raiyan.

But Raiyan never talks about his struggles. Most of the time, I do the talking and he listens. He is a great listener, by the way. He has also shown

his patience side to me during our maths sessions. He stays as patient as a person can be while teaching me math.

It's hard work—teaching me math. Ever since I got 4 out of 100 in school math, I had never been good at it. I always used to dodge it as much as possible. My home tutors used to get mad at me for not trying hard. While I shared with him my past teacher's failed attempts to make me a math wizard, he said, "There are no bad students, only bad teachers."

"You haven't baked me a cake yet," he says, slicing the cheddar cheese for the sandwich he is going to make now. He has seen my baking photos on Facebook. I promised to bake a cake for him.

Right now, I'm seated in front of him at the dining table, head down, hands stretched forward. We are done with today's math and my brain is tired AF. He makes me work hard and today's session was grueling. I peer at him by raising my head a bit, "Let me sleep," I groan.

He glances at me and smiles, hearing me groaning.

"Even your sandwich can't make my brain untangle now, you cruel."

He laughs out loud at my cry-like groaning. I raise my head and try to stare him down.

"Is he making you work hard, Ellie?" Nana Bhai asks as he enters the room and heads to the water filter in the corner.

"No doubt. Today it was grueling. He made me solve twenty maths, Nana Bhai, twenty maths!"

Nana Bhai laughs.

Raiyan rolls his eyes. "It's all for your own good," he says.

I throw the pencil in my hand right in his direction and epically fail to hit him. The pencil falls on the floor instead. Raiyan and Nana Bhai both

start laughing.

“Raiyan, make sure you pay off her hard work by treating her well,” Nana Bhai says, still laughing.

Raiyan glances at me. “Of course.”

Then he pushes the sandwich plate over the table toward me. He sits across from me, his eyes gleaming, “Finish it and I will show you something today.”

“What are you going to show me? Is it going to make me feel better?” I ask him, taking a bite from the sandwich. Nana Bhai seems curious too.

“A lot better, I promise,” he winks.

I take a long glance at him then concentrate on my sandwich.

“A surprise then?” Nana Bhai speaks up.

I look at him and find him smiling. He is thinking about something.

“Your nanu used to love surprises,” he says. “I never forgot to bring flowers and write letters to her on special occasions. Often I used to take her out. For dinner, or a sudden tour. She loved it.” Raiyan and I, both are silent right now. Listening to him, enchanted. Whenever Nana Bhai talks about nanu, he talks with such respect and love like she is still around, hearing us.

“Each morning throughout her life, she used to kiss me on the forehead before leaving the bed. At first, she thought I hadn’t sensed it. One day when I told her I sensed it even if I was half-asleep, she giggled like a little girl,” Nana Bhai smiles saying that, as he has gone back to those days. “She was a remarkable human being, your nanu. She made my life only better.” he exhales a sigh. Raiyan moves from where he was standing and stands behind Nana Bhai, hugging him from the back, planting a kiss on his cheek. Nana Bhai pats his shoulder.

Raiyan drags out a chair and sits beside him. I smile at them. I love their bonding. It's so natural that you would only wish you could've had that. I have never seen such a gentle and humble person as these two sitting in front of me. I've never heard Raiyan raising his voice till now to anyone. Not to his employees in the bookstore, not to the maids around the house, not to any outsiders, not to anyone. He is always so calm and collected. Maybe Raiyan has got that decency from his grandfather, who is top to bottom a gentleman.

"If you are lucky, you meet such a person once in your lifetime," Nana Bhai says again. "Often we don't realize *that* while they are still around. We realize when they are gone. But we were lucky. We realized it at once. And nurtured our relationship like a garden every day," Nana Bhai says, eyes kept on our eyes, "Unfortunately the scenario was different for my children. None of them was sincere enough to hold it tight." He then moves his eyes towards Raiyan. "I believe my grandson will be different."

He takes Raiyan's hand in his hand and says, "If you ever find that kind of love, fight against all odds to keep it. In the end, it's all that matters."

I see Raiyan taking a quick glance at me before he nods. Squeezing Nana Bhai's hand firmly, he says, "I will."

I suck in a breath, looking at him, having no idea why it's just tinged in my chest. And I feel it doesn't go unnoticed by either of them.

Nana Bhai eyes me for a moment, then says, "That's applied to you too." He then rises from his chair and comes near me, besides my seat. He places his hand over my head and kisses it before heading to his study.

Raiyan and I fall silent. Taking in every syllable of Nana Bhai's words. I go through them in my mind repeatedly. And it synchronizes perfectly with

what I believe- *you fall only once in love*. And I haven't felt that magnitude of love yet in my life. But he has felt it—Raiyan, for the girl who saved his life. As my eyes are fixed upon him, he brings his hands under his chin, placing them on the table. “What are you thinking?” He asks, lifting his brows.

“That, I never fell in love.”

He gives me a half-hearted smile but says nothing.

“But you had and you let her go,” I say.

The color of his face changes immediately. He stays still for a second then moves his hand from his chin and folds it over his chest, eyes still on me. “I didn't let her go,” he says.

“How did you not let her go? You are not with her anymore.”

“It's a complicated thing to explain.”

“Okay. No pressure. Tell me when you want to.”

I take my glance back to the plate where my half-eaten sandwich is resting. I grab it to finish it. And he doesn't move his eyes even for a second.

I finish the rest of the sandwich in three bites and get up from the chair. “Show me what you want to show,” I'm ready to see.

He rises from the chair too, and says, “You are going to need a jacket. I'm taking my bike.”

I've never ridden on a bike before. It's going to be the first time and I admit, I'm scared.

“Don't worry, I will be as careful as possible.” He assures me.

“And obviously not too fast,” I add to his sentence.

He smiles while wearing the helmet, “Obviously not too fast.” Then, he helps me put on my helmet as I was struggling to clutch the strap. He starts the bike as I comfortably sit on the backseat and hold him tightly, clasping his shoulder. “Ready?” He asks me. I nod.

He slowly turns the motorbike around and heads towards the street.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask him as we move past my house.

“A favourite place of mine,” he says loudly so that I can hear, as it’s tough to hear anything once the moving starts because of the wind.

Right now, we are on the highway and I’m not feeling scared anymore. Rather, I’m enjoying it. I’m enjoying the icy wind slapping on my face. And Raiyan is driving as slowly as possible.

“Are you okay? Or should I drive slower?” He asks me.

“I’m okay. Go on.”

He really is driving slowly and carefully. Whenever there is a bump on the road, he slows down even more.

We have moved past the Parliament House and a few more crossings already. As he is heading through the Tejgaon flyover, suddenly I’m having a feeling that we are moving towards Hatir Jheel. I have never roamed around Hatir Jheel before but moved past it several times. I heard it looks beautiful at night as all the bridges over the lake are decked up in colourful lights. People go there all the time with their family, partners, or even alone.

“Are we going to see Hatir Jheel?” I ask him from behind.

“More than Hatir-Jheel,” he replies.

And I was right. We really are entering the Hatir-Jheel area. The air is heavy with the smell of food and the place is really crowded. We moved past a few food stalls beside the road. People are seated on the sidewalk-

chatting, eating, and taking photos. I should have brought my camera with me. I will definitely bring it next time I come here.

Raiyan drives past a roadside restaurant and takes a turn away from the main road to a quiet, long gravel path that leads to the water in the lake.

He parks the bike there beside an electricity pole and motions me to get down. I get down and take off the helmet, placing it on the bike seat. I look around and find the place extremely beautiful and quaint, with the sound of the small waves touching the shore.

I can see the decked-up bridges from here. The colours of the lights on the bridges are changing often. From yellow to green, from green to purple. With the dark night sky above, bridges that are enlightened and the sweet sound of the water ahead of us, as we are standing on this shore, I can think of only one word for this moment and that is- *perfect!*

“So, what do you think? Do you feel better now?” Raiyan asks me, his eyes grazing over the water.

“It’s perfect, Raiyan,” I whisper. I turn around to face him. “Thank you,” I say, setting my eyes on his face.

He looks me in my eyes, smiling, and takes my hand. “Come.” And my chest suddenly does this flip I can’t comprehend right now. I can feel my heart racing faster than usual for no reason that I can come up with. I take a quick deep breath and we walk further ahead. We walk towards the water and sit down right near the shoreline, my palm is still clasped inside his. Rather than leaving it, he squeezes it tight. And I feel like in no hurry to leave his either.

“I found this place a few years back after my grandmother passed away. Since then, I often come here,” he says, looking beyond the water. “At the

beginning, I only used to come here whenever I was sad, but then I come here even if I feel ecstatic.”

“Are you sad or happy today?” I ask him.

He smiles, looking at me, “What do you think?”

I shrug, “You tell me.” I’m trying hard to hide the fluttering inside my chest.

He holds a longer gaze at me before coming up with an answer, “More than ecstatic.”

And there it is, this thing in my chest, flips again. “Why’s that?” I ask him, still trying hard to keep my voice as calm as possible.

He laughs and let’s go of my hand, but doesn’t reply.

I look up at the night sky and found a thousand stars gleaming. It was my favourite pastime in my childhood. Hussain and I used to count stars in the evening on our terrace. He knew all the names of the planets and stars.

“Do you know the name of that star, Raiyan?” I ask him, pointing at the one nearest to the moon. It’s shining the brightest. Raiyan moves his gaze skyward. “Which one?”

“The one closest to the moon?” I say, stilling my gaze at it.

He nods in knowing. Of course he will know. What a silly question I have asked him. This is Raiyan, who knows everything.

“It’s Venus, and it’s not a star. It’s a planet,” he says.

“Yeah. Still we call it the evening star. It was my favorite thing to do when I was a child...”

“Counting stars?” He interrupts me.

I nod. “Yes.”

“Mine as well,” he says, moving his gaze from the sky to me.

Suddenly, a memory from childhood emerges in my mind, and I laugh.

“What?” Raiyan asks.

“Nothing, just a silly memory,” I say, waving my hand.

“Tell me,” he says, smiling.

“I told you about Hussain, right? My best friend from childhood.”

He nods.

“Well, one day we were walking in the front yard randomly and it was a full moon that evening. I was walking, looking skyward, and I asked Hussain a dumb question...”

“What? That ‘*why the moon is walking with me?*’”, he says, grinning.

To be honest, I’m stunned right now. “How do you know I asked this same question?” I ask him.

He shrugs, “Come on, it’s every child’s wonder. As you mentioned the moon and walking, so I placed the pieces together.”

Well, my amazement is still there. “Makes sense,” I remark.

He laughs out loud at hearing me. “What did he say? Hussain. When you asked this?”

A smile forms on my lips remembering his reply. “*The moon loves you, that’s why it’s following you*—he said.”

Raiyan keeps on seeing me intently before speaking again, “You loved him a lot, right?”

As I’m about to answer his question, I feel a wave of anger rising inside me. Loved him? Damn! He was my best friend! And he left me just like that, like Eiliyah doesn’t exist. Like we never met.

“He smashed the tiny little heart of mine. He wasn’t there when I needed him the most. I hate him, Raiyan.” My face twitches up as I say it. Raiyan falls silent.

I see a little puppy approaching us and all my anger wheezes out. I wave at the puppy to come over and he does. I pick him up with both of my hands. Raiyan leans in to pet him.

“You like dogs?” I ask him.

He nods.

“Me too. I freaking love them.” I put down the puppy as I see his mother around the corner. As soon as the little dog sees his mother, he runs away.

“I had a dog named Doggo,” I say and Doggo’s innocent, playful face flashes in my mind. “I lost him and I still carry that scar with me. Since then, I never adopted another dog.”

Raiyan nods in understanding. “It’s difficult to let go of loved ones. Be it an animal or human being. The pain is the same.”

“We human beings are cruel. We let everyone down. I let my Doggo down and I will never forgive myself for that. After all these years, my love for Doggo hasn’t flinched a bit.”

“Are you okay, Ellie?” Raiyan asks.

I smile. “Yep.” I let slip Doggo and Hussain deep inside my mind again.

He nods smilingly then turns his eyes on his wristwatch. “Five minutes to go,” he says.

I frown, “For what?”

“To reach nine o’clock.” His smile is suspicious.

“What happens at nine o’clock?”

“You’ll see,” then he glances away again at the water.

What will happen at nine o’clock?

Four minutes...

Three minutes...

Two minutes...

One minute...

Then suddenly some colourful sprays of water leap up from the lake to go all up high in the air. Seven sprays at a time, dancing in a cascade, reflected against colorful lights with background music.

“There it is—*the water show*,” Raiyan says, breaking me from a state of amazement that’s happening in front of me.

“Wow!” I come up with the only word which seems to be fitted for this moment.

Raiyan laughs.

“What was I doing my whole life?” I’m still completely awestruck. The sprays of water are still dancing in the air to touch the sky.

“Waiting for this kind of moment to arrive,” he says. And he sounds perfect. I really was waiting for this kind of moment to happen. But today, I won’t reflect on how much I have missed in my life. Rather, I’ll freeze myself right at this moment. I’ll capture every passing second with my eyes and store them safely in my mind.

“You brought me here to show the water dance?” I ask him, still amazed.

He laughs out again, “Water dance? Nice naming.” Then he shakes his head and says, “Not only the water dance, I wanted to show you this place, this moment here—You deserve it Ellie.”

I don’t know what I deserve but this night, this place and the person beside me who brought me here to give me this experience—altogether it seems like a dream suddenly. And a fear of waking up to find me in a harsh reality shrouds my mind. “Raiyan?”

“Hm?”

“What if the next moment comes with dread?”

He seems to sense the fear in my voice. He scoots closer to me and takes my hand in his hand, “Of course dread may come, but you are not alone Ellie,” his clasp gets tighter and he gives me a soft smile, his eyes gleaming, “You can’t live the rest of your life in a fear of what might come next.”

I nod realizing what he is trying to say. “You remember I gave you the chocolate the other day, and you liked it so much?”

Yes, I remember him giving me the Swiss chocolate. It was yummy. “Yeah.”

“You refused to eat all of it at once. You said you are saving some for later because good things should be eaten bit by bit, not all at once, even if you feel like it.”

“Yeah, I said it.”

He shakes his head slowly and his grip around my palm tightens. “You should grab the good things all at once whenever it shows up. You should have eaten the whole chocolate at once if you feel like it. You don’t know if the next moment is going to arrive at all.”

While listening to him, and feeling every word he is saying in my gut, I don’t look at him; rather, my gaze is still fixed at the water. He places his fingers underneath my chin and turns my face gently towards him. I pull my gaze up at his eyes. “Live in this moment, Ellie, and damn every horrifying thing that may come right in the next moment.”

“All my life, whenever I felt happy, it was ruined right by the next moment,” I whisper.

“Is life supposed to be certain? It’s not, right? So, the best we can do for ourselves is—living in the moment and feeling every bit of it.”

It hits 9:30 in the clock as we get up to get on the bike and head home. He helps me put on the helmet again. I like this part of riding the bike already; him helping me with the helmet. I smile, looking at him.

“Why are you smiling?” He asks me while wearing his one. I shake my head, “Nothing.”

I enjoy the little moments between us. When he makes me a sandwich, brings me coffee, whenever he strokes my hair, his mischievous grin, when he walks me home though he just lives next door, when he shows me how to hold the badminton racket each time I hold it wrong, or simply when we just sit there, side by side, doing nothing.

The only thing that has scared me is today’s chest fluttering around him. I can’t even look at his eyes when my heartbeat gets faster.

As we hop on the bike, he asks me before starting it, “You must be hungry. Let’s eat somewhere?”

I’m hungry and I need food as my stomach is growling. I nod, “Okay.”

He parks the bike at a nearby restaurant- *Kebab & more*. I like it instantly as it’s an open eatery and kebabs are being grilled in a live kitchen.

I walk ahead and save ourselves a table. Raiyan sits across from me.

“Raiyan?” A girl speaks out from my behind. As I turn back to check, I find a pretty girl with long brown hair and green eyes standing over two feet away from my chair. She is smiling and her smile is darted at Raiyan, who has just looked up at her.

“Hey Tania!” Hearing the name on his lips, I again turn my head around, this time to take a real good look at her. She is tall, at least 5’8, slender, toned waist and hip, wearing a red bodycon dress, with high heels and contact lens—she looks like those models from the Cosmopolitan magazine.

Damn! I must say it’s really difficult to move on from a girl like her. I’m not surprised that she might be the love of his life. I can feel my shoulder drop while I turn my gaze back on Raiyan, who has now risen from his seat and reached out to hug her. And it stings right in my chest like a needle, seeing them hugging each other. I look away. How come he is hugging her right now? Dude! She is dating your friend!

“So, how’s everything?” She asks him as both of them release each other from their hold.

“Great!” Raiyan replies, “You?”

She shrugs, “As usual.” Then her gaze falls upon me, and suddenly she realizes that Raiyan’s got company. I give her a friendly smile, though. In reply, she smiles back, confused.

“She’s Eiliyah,” Raiyan says, pointing at me. I nod at her “Hi!”

“Ellie, she’s Tania, my friend,” he says.

Well, she is not your friend, she’s your ex-girlfriend.

Tania is nice enough to reach her hand to me, which I didn’t, “Hello.”

They then keep talking about university when I keep wandering my eyes around the restaurant. Their conversation ends as a guy comes from behind Tania and pulls her closer suddenly, “Hey babe!”

Babe? He is that *betrayer* then. Sorry, you don’t make your friend’s ex your present. That turns you into a betrayer.

“Hi, Raiyan,” he says, his voice dry and nonchalant.

“Hey, Zawad.” Raiyan’s voice is equally nonchalant.

“Came for dinner?” The guy—Zawad asks him. Raiyan nods, “Yep. Ellie and I are having dinner.”

He says, motioning at me. I then give another nice smile, looking up at him.

“Girlfriend?” Zawad asks, smiling.

“She is a friend,” Tania rectifies him immediately, with an edge in her voice, as if he committed an offense.

“Well, nice to see you guys,” Raiyan says, clearly showing no interest in continuing the small talk.

They nod and say bye to us. He drops on the chair immediately, relieved, as he brushes his hair back.

“Ex huh?” I bite my lip as soon as the words slide through my mouth.

He looks up immediately. “How do you know?”

“I heard from Ishita. She just once casually told me while we were discussing our relationship.” God! My mouth!

He nods, “I got it. Actually, I would have told you myself.” Well, now he seems to get into an apologizing mood for no reason.

“Hey, it’s okay if you didn’t tell me Raiyan,” I say. “You don’t need to share every little things with me,” I assure him, giving his hand a little squeeze.

“But I want to,” he says, “I enjoy sharing things with you.”

And... that fluttering is back. I yelp then give him a quick smile. I drink a gulp of water to stay calm.

He calls out to the waiter. “What do you want to order?” He asks me as the waiter arrives.

I go through the menu and say, “Reshmi kebab and chicken tandoori with garlic nan, what are you gonna eat?”

“I’ll take sheek kebab and garlic nan,” he replies.

The waiter lists down on his notepad and leaves.

“Tania was my friend, actually,” he says. “We go to the same university, same batch,” he continues. “We share the same friend circle, and we started dating a year ago. Before that, we used to be really close friends. She is a nice girl, but things didn’t work out between us, so we broke up within six months.”

I nod, “Are you guys still friends?”

He chuckles, “Yep. Things are okay between us now.”

I nod again. Though I don’t know how come it’s okay if your ex is dating your friend currently? But I’m not going to make another slip-up right now.

The waiter comes back with two glass bottles of Coca-Cola. He puts the bottles down on the table and leaves.

“She was the only girl I had ever been in a relationship with,” he says, taking a sip from the bottle of coke.

“So, she was special?” My brow gets lifted automatically.

He laughs. “She was a friend. I have trust issues. It’s difficult for me to get into a relationship if we are not friends first.”

“Okay. You sound like me. I don’t do casual dating either,” I say.

“I did casual dating. I went on dates a few times. But relationship—just once.”

“Oh.” Then you don’t sound like me in this matter at all. “I feel awkward about the idea of it,” I say.

“Casual dating?” He asks.

“Yeah.”

“Why so?”

I shrug, “I don’t know. I feel like I would have nothing to say to the other person, or I wouldn’t be able to connect because I won’t be completely emotionally involved?”

He nods slowly. “I got it.”

“You think I’m being weird, right?”

He laughs, “Obviously not. You don’t want to waste your emotion just like that. I’m liking it, in fact.”

I smile, “Yeah, that’s right. I don’t want to give away my efforts into nothing, though it seems like I did it with Aryan.”

He leans forward to touch my hand. “Hey, are you still mad at Aryan?”

“Of course I am,” saying that, thinking about Aryan makes me want to punch him in the face, “He has wasted my time, effort and emotion. All those years for nothing,” I scowl.

He takes a long glance and then speaks out, “If he comes back now, what would you do?”

I straighten up on my seat and look right at his eyes. “One thing about me, Raiyan, I’ll go to extra lengths to save any relationship, as long as it doesn’t hurt my self-respect. So, the Aryan chapter is closed for me.”

He seems to be relieved. He smiles at me. “I was expecting this reply.”

I smile back.

Our food has arrived. The kebabs look juicy and moist enough. Raiyan takes my plate and serves Nans there. I touch the Nan unaware of the fact that it's super-hot. I move away my hand immediately.

"Need help?" Raiyan asks, seeing me stay still, not touching the food, waiting for it to be cooled down.

I shake my head, "No, it's fine. You carry on."

He seems to be fine with the blazing temperature of the food.

"Let me help you," he takes my plate and starts tearing the nan apart, turning it into small pieces, then he pulls the flesh away from the bone of the tandoori chicken to let the steam off inside. He places the plate back again in front of me and grins, "It's all done. Have it now."

It strikes 10:45 p.m. on the clock as he stops the bike in front of our gate. I get down from the bike and tie the helmet beside the back seat. Suddenly it hits me that this was our first time eating out. Not only the first time eating out, it's our first time going out together. We hang out a lot in his house or in the bookstore or in the badminton court, but that's it. We never went outside the neighbourhood together. I walk around the bike and stand in front of him. "Guess what?"

"What?" He asks.

"It was our first outing," I grin.

"I know," he says, winking at me.

I frown. Why am I getting the feeling that, as it was going to be our first outing, so he made it special on purpose? "So, you made it special

deliberately?”

“Probably.”

“Why probably?”

He puts on his helmet and starts the bike. “See you tomorrow, Ellie.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay. If you want to keep it a secret, I don’t mind.”

He laughs.

We say goodbye to each other, but he doesn’t move from the gate until I get inside the house.

I have safely landed in the living room. I text him jokingly, locking the door behind me.

Thanks a lot, madam—he texts back, and I heard his bike’s vroom sound moving away from our gate.

Butterflies

“D id you read Peter Pan?” Hussain asked.

We were talking after a week since that night. While I asked him why he didn’t come to meet me, he said he was overloaded with homework. But I didn’t believe him.

“No. I didn’t,” I replied, though I read it, but I wouldn’t tell him. I didn’t want to give him the pleasure of knowing that I read it and quite liked it.

“Why?” He asked again.

“First you tell me, why were you ignoring me?” I asked him.

Hussain frowned. “I didn’t ignore you. Why would I do that?”

His reply enraged me. “You didn’t come over here in the entire week. I even went to the front yard of the orphanage several times. You were nowhere.”

He didn’t reply, which drove me mad. “I saw you sneaking around at night,” I said. “You were back in that house, weren’t you?”

This time he looked at me, “How did you see me?”

Instead of answering his question, I said, “Why did you go there without me?”

He fell quiet again.

“Answer me.”

He was twisting his fingers. What is he hiding from me?

“I-I can’t tell you, Ellie,” he said. His voice sounded timid.

“Why?” I couldn’t think of any logic behind his—I can’t tell you.

“I just can’t.”

I became so mad that I couldn’t talk.

“Don’t be upset, Ellie.”

“But I tell you everything!” I cried out. When I got angry, I used to cry. I thought he was my best friend. But it seemed like he didn’t consider me as his best friend otherwise he would tell me.

“Please go away. I don’t want to talk to you,” I said with tears in my eyes. Hussain crawled out of my small tent quietly. Looking at me once, he then left the room, shutting the door behind him. I threw one of my toy cars at the door. Doggo was in my bed. Hearing the thumping sound, he jolted up.

I promised myself that I would never talk to Hussain.

“Are you guys fighting?” Mom asked me that day.

I was watching Scooby-Doo on TV and had no interest in talking about Hussain.

“Ellie, I’m asking you something.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“What happened? I saw Hussain leave earlier. He looked sad.”

“He doesn’t see me as his friend. So, I’ll not talk to him ever.”

Hearing me, mom sighed. "You should not stop talking to him, Ellie. Not at this moment."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Because we are going to move out. They have transferred your father to a different place. We are going to move at the end of next month."

After hearing what mom just said, I was no longer interested in watching Scooby doo. "But why? How can he do this?"

"It's not in his hand, sweetie. You are only eight, and these are official things that you won't understand. That's why I'm asking you to stop fighting with Hussain. Spend as much time as you can with your best friend. You have little time left in your hand."

"It's not fair, Mom. How can I leave him? He doesn't have anyone except me!"

Scooting closer to me, Mom pulled me toward her. "You'll leave him your phone number. That way, you can talk to him every day."

Tears were rolling down my cheeks. "Phone calls are not enough, Mom. I don't want to move. Please tell Baba that he can go away if he wants. We're going to stay."

"We are a family Ellie. Family needs to stay together."

But Hussain was also a part of my family. It's not fair to leave him behind.

I was thinking, how would I break the news to Hussain? He would hate me forever.

November 2018

Areeba's eyeballs are about to jump out, "You guys walked holding hands? And he helped you with your dinner? You guys went on a date?" She asks me for the second time.

I shake my head, "It was not a date. I told you why he took me there."

We are seated on our terrace face to face a week later that evening.

"And you took a week to tell me that?" She throws me a glare.

"You were busy with the exams, Arru," I say, defending myself. "I was waiting for the right time."

She stares at me. "Well, I'll move to that topic later. First, you are a dumbo. Of course, it was a date, silly. He is into you. Can't you see it?" Her eyes are gleaming while she says that.

And my heart does the flip again. I feel blood rushes towards my cheeks. I bite my lower lip to brush off the thought of a *date*.

"An outing with a friend can't be a date. Besides, he didn't mention it was a *date*," I point out the fact.

Areeba chuckles. "I have nothing to say, Ellie. You *are* such a dumbo. Not everything needs to be said out loud, you dumb," she says, rolling her eyes.

"How do you used to feel when Shahed was around earlier in your relationship?" I change the topic. Otherwise, she would keep bashing me.

Her face brightens up, she smiles at hearing that. "Butterflies," she replies, "It's like butterflies flapping inside your chest."

I yelp. I know about butterflies. I know where it leads. I have read all about it in the books. But unfortunately never experienced them in the presence of Aryan.

"Why do you ask?" Areeba says, lifting her brows, "Do you feel them around Raiyan?" and the ultimate question.

I try to hide my eyes by turning my face the other way.

She rises from the chair, lifts the chair up, and places it in front of me, then sits down again face to face, “No point of hiding your face, girl.”

I look at her, scrunching up my nose, “Yeah, I do,” I say finally.

She gives me a million-dollar lottery-winning smile. “Raiyan’s got a hunch of it?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

She smirks, “Huh? Of course, he knows.”

I shake my head again. “I guess it’s just a crush, Arru. Nothing more.”

She keeps smirking, “Everything starts from a crush, darling. Crush is where everything starts.”

“But I didn’t feel like it around Aryan,” I confess.

She rolls her eyes, hearing me, “You started a relationship with him before even feeling anything. He asked for your number, you gave it and bang! From the next day, you guys were a couple.”

Hearing it out loud now, I feel so strange about the whole dynamic. It was like I jumped right into a relationship.

“It was out of loneliness, Ellie. Your mind was looking for someone to rely on back then after your parent’s divorce, and Aryan came along,” she leans forward and touches my arm gently, seeing me lost in my thoughts, “It happens Ellie. It happens all the time. People jump into relationships without thinking twice when they are younger, lonely, and try to keep a holdfast. There is nothing wrong in it.”

“I don’t want to survive relying on anyone again, Arru.”

“First, you’ve been surviving on your own, Ellie. And having someone around, on whom you can rely, is not a bad thing. If we all would rely on ourselves only, then humankind wouldn’t go far. It would have ended with

Adam and Eve,” she says, “Aryan could have been your holdfast but he wasn’t ultimately, rather he looked down on you, turned you into a frenzy, made you confused. But altogether you overcame it and you’ve become your own firm grip,” Areeba says in a reassuring tone, “And now, you are older than before, more mature, not lonely anymore because you have friends and of course me.” She says with pride, “And you have become someone on whom some people rely, like me. Like some of your friends. Your mom used to rely on you so much. Forhad relies on you. I saw the love and reliance in that child’s eyes for you.”

I let out a deep breath thinking about Forhad. It’s been a while since I haven’t gone to meet him. I used to go twice a month to check on him before my mother’s death in the orphanage where he lives. I feel ashamed now, that my mother’s death struck me in a way, I haven’t gone to see him in a month.

Areeba coughs up, clearing her throat, “Ellie, what are you thinking?”

“Nothing, just about Forhad. I haven’t met him in a while.”

She nods slowly, “That’s okay. You are a human being after all. Your mom passed away, you moved in with your father, you had been sick for days, and you are going through a break-up. Don’t push yourself. But each time you meet Forhad, you feel better.”

I smile looking up at her. She is right. Each time I meet this boy, my heart feels content. I feel like I have got a grasp of Hussain—a friend who was there, during some tough time in my childhood, whom I have lost in the slip of time.

“Do you remember Hussain, Arru?” I ask her, setting my eyes beyond the white clouds that are floating in the sky.

“Of course, you mentioned him several times.”

“Forhad reminds me of him a lot. I think of him sometimes. I even searched him on social media, but found nothing.”

“I hope you meet him someday,” she nods.

I smile again, “He used to be the only relief at that time in my life. But no, I don’t want to meet him anymore.” As I say that I know deep inside how big that lie is.

I’ve talked to her about Hussain a thousand times, we even once went back to the orphanage in the hope to find *something* about him even if it’s a string of thread. But nothing. He had just vanished into thin air.

“We find the right people at the right time, always believe in that,” Areeba says looking at me.

“I do. Hussain was there when I didn’t even know that I needed a friend like him around. Then you and Aunt Trisha— when we were alone, my mom and I, clawing our way out of a desperate situation.”

“And now, Alif, Ishita and Raiyan,” she ends the sentence and winks.

My phone rings as I was about to spank Areeba. “Who is it? Raiyan?” She is grinning right now.

She is right, it is him. “Yes,” I say, receiving the call.

“Can you come over for a minute? I have something to show you,” he sounds excited.

“What is it?” I ask.

He hesitates, “it’s a surprise.”

“Okay. Give me five minutes.”

“What happened?” Areeba asks as soon as I end the call.

“He said, it’s a surprise and asked me to go now.”

“Okay then, go. I’ll take a nap in the meantime.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” she whacks my ass and pushes me, “Now, go on.”
I tie my hair up in a ponytail then leave.

As I reach the main gate of Raiyan’s Place, I find him waiting for me in the driveway. He starts walking toward me.

“I don’t know if you’ll like it. But promise me, if you don’t like it, you’ll say it without any hesitation, he says as soon as I reach near him.

I nod. “Okay.”

Now it’s really getting intriguing and I can’t wait further to see whatever he wants to show me.

Then he starts walking toward the garage, I follow him. We take a turn around the garage, and behind it, there is a sunroom in their backyard. Though I’ve never been there. I thought they use it as a storeroom.

He stops in front of the sunroom and motions me to step inside. I look at him hesitantly then push the door open and step inside to find a gorgeous-looking empty wooden bookshelf standing in front of me.

“It’s for you,” he stands behind me and whispers in my ear, as I’m still lost in wonder.

I turn around to face him, “What do you mean?”

“Remember, you needed a bookshelf.”

Yes, I know. Then my eyes get stuck on a crate of tools kept on top of a work table beside the bookshelf—a jigsaw, a chop saw, an electric drill, and some other tools lying there I don’t know the name of. Then suddenly it strikes my mind, “Did you make it? The bookshelf?”

He grins, looking at me, “Yes. Do you like it?”

What?!

Did he make an entire bookshelf by himself?

I walk around the bookshelf without answering him. So, that's why it took him more than weeks to deliver it. He was actually making it. "How did you make it? Where did you learn to make it?" I ask him, leaning against the shelf.

"In a workshop, a few years ago," he replies.

I chuckle, "What else did you learn? You seem like an all-rounder."

He smiles, "First tell me, do you like it? I can modify it if it doesn't go with your preference."

"Like it? I love it, Raiyan. It's more than perfect." Then I step closer to him, "Thank you for this wonderful gift. I've never thought that you would *make* one."

"Anything for you," he says, setting his eyes on me. I realize I'm standing so close to him that his breathing is touching my face. I yelp and take a step back.

"I'll arrange to place it in your room by today if you don't mind," he says, clearing his throat.

"Today is fine."

Then a silence hangs there between us for a few seconds.

"So, when were you actually making it because you are quite busy with classes, badminton practice, and my math session?" I say, breaking the silence.

He shrugs, "After dinner actually."

I nod, "You could have just bought one from the shop. Why take all the hassle?"

He doesn't reply at once. Rather he bites his lower lip and eyeing me with the intensity of his, he finally comes up with a question, "Do you really want to know?"

I don't know whether it's his tone or his intense gaze or his question, which makes me somewhat motionless right now. I feel my feet get as heavy as they are fixed on the floor, my heart pounding against my chest so rapidly, I forget to breathe, "Yeah?" The only word somehow manages to escape my mouth.

He was standing like five to six feet away from me, leaning against the wall, hands tucked inside his jeans pockets, but now I see him stepping forward inch by inch, then he stops right after making the gap between us only one foot, he is so close that I can smell his aftershave. He places his right hand beside me, on the shelf's upper row, and looks directly into my eyes, "Because some people are worth taking all the hassle." He takes a pause before speaking again and brings his other hand to the side of my cheek, "Buying things is easy. And you, Eiliyah, are not made for something *easy*. You are worthy of moving the mountain."

I quickly look away. I was clearly not expecting what I have just heard.

His words keep reverberating in my mind. But he doesn't stop watching me. I can feel his eyes grazing all over my face, trying to read each thought that is racing in my head. Feeling his fingers brushing on my cheek, hearing what he has just said, I move my eyes from my feet to his eyes. My heartbeat, my breathing, the cells inside my brain—all are moving so fast at this moment that I'm unable to comprehend anything out of it.

I move my lips to say something but stop midway. I don't know what to say. I have no idea what's happening between us except the butterflies in my chest.

I *really* need to gather my thoughts together to fill the dots. He, on the contrary, is still gazing at me with no intention to move. I place my one

hand right against his chest and feel his heart racing too. I clear my throat and open my mouth, “Thanks, Raiyan.” I finally smile, looking up at him. He tucks my hair behind my ear and smiles back.

Then he steps back slowly, releasing the gentle hold of my face.

“What are you doing tonight?” He asks, straightening his back, hands back inside his pockets.

I shrug, still trying to hold a grasp of the moment that just happened between us. “Nothing much. Areeba is here, she is gonna stay over tonight. So we’re probably gonna talk all night,” I say.

He nods.

“Why?” I ask

“I was thinking if you were free, we could have watched a movie on TV.”

So, he wants to spend more time together. He seems a bit sad though that the movie plan can’t happen tonight. I can’t hide my smile, seeing him sad for the fact that I’m preoccupied today.

“What about tomorrow evening? I’ll come over and we’ll watch a movie together after our math session?” I offer him the alternative.

“Umm...I have an exam tomorrow,” he says.

“Oh! Then the day after tomorrow?”

“You forgot- the badminton final game is on the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah. It totally slipped out of my mind. Sorry!”

He smiles. “It’s fine. We’ll plan some other day, then.”

I smile too. “Okay.”

As soon as I came home from his place, Areeba started shooting questions after questions.

“He is so much into you Ellie. My boyfriend never made anything for me,” she said as I was done with answering all her queries.

I laughed and I was blushing while talking to her about him. God! I’m still blushing and it seems like a smile has been plastered on my face permanently since afternoon.

I can’t stop thinking about the moment that happened today between me and Raiyan. He installed the bookshelf in my room.

Baba asked me about it, I just plain lied to him that Raiyan helped me buy it. I don’t want him and aunt Rubina to contemplate about us right at the moment. It will instigate further drama in my life. Nothing good will come out.

Right now, Areeba and I are watching a movie on my laptop, *Me before you*. Areeba is sobbing beside me while watching it.

As we are in the middle of a scene where Emilia Clarke is on the beach, the doorbell rings. A while later, Ishita pops into my bedroom out of nowhere, swinging the door open.

She didn’t inform me that she was coming. She looks devastated, her hair is matted, and her eyes are puffy from I don’t know how long she cried. Areeba pauses the movie and I rush towards Ishita, help her to sit on my bed, and shut the door behind me.

“What happened?” I ask her, as I’m clearly scared. The Ishita I know, is always cheery, no matter what. So, seeing her like this has kind of taken me aback. My phone suddenly chimes, a text message from Alif—*Is Ishita at your place?*

Ishita is here and Alif is knocking me to know her whereabouts, I smell trouble now. Though I quickly reply to him- *she is here*.

Please watch over her for me—he texts back.

Sure thing— I type and dab the send button. I would of course watch over her even if he didn't ask me to.

“Can I crash the night here?” Ishita asks me, wiping a tear from her cheek.

I firmly squeeze her hand, “Of course.”

Then she suddenly breaks down into tears. Areeba slightly nudges me with the question on her face, “What's wrong?”

I shrug as I don't have a single clue.

“Ishita, did you eat anything? You look pale,” I ask her, wrapping her in my arms. She is really looking pale and her lips seem dry.

She is sobbing right now, “No,” she says, still sobbing.

“Let me bring you food, okay?”

She nods. I gesture Areeba to stay with her. Then I go to the kitchen and make a sandwich for her.

She has stopped crying as I enter my room holding the plate.

“Areeba, can you pour a glass of water?” Areeba nods and does so. I sit beside Ishita and hand her over the plate. She was probably starving, as she jumps on the food.

I stay quiet, letting her eat first. She will talk once she is ready. Areeba is standing, leaning against the closet. Eyeing me sometimes.

“Water,” Ishita says, as she is done eating dinner. I hand her the glass.

She finishes the water in a gulp. Then she rests her back against the headboard of the bed and shuts her eyes. She looks distraught. Something is bothering her deeply.

“It’s my parents,” she says finally, after a few minutes. I nod, letting her continue.

“I always wanted to study abroad. Even begged them after my A’ level to send me to the USA for higher studies. But they denied it. Because they didn’t have enough money— this is what they said at that time.” She pauses for a moment, then says again, “Now, guess what? They are sending Alif for an MBA to the USA, once he graduates next year.” Her eyes well up with tears again. She wipes a drop from her lower lid as it was about to roll. “Don’t misunderstand me. I love my brother. I love him to death. But my parents? Why did they lie to me earlier? Now they have money, then they didn’t have it? Even if they somehow managed money to send him abroad for an MBA NOW, why didn’t they think of me first? They know it has always been *my* dream to study there.”

She stops and squeezes her forehead in frustration, “My parents have always favoured Alif over me and they think that I don’t feel it. But I do. So, I let them know today that I do feel favouritism. I told them the ugly truth right on their face.”

I look at her and I can feel her. I feel her even though I’ve never been in a similar situation. Because parents do let down their children a thousand times in different ways and they don’t even realize it. From their point of view, it’s the children who let them down. I’m an only child to my parents. But my father never gave a shit about my dreams or passions.

“What did Alif say?” I ask her.

“He doesn’t even want to study in the USA. He wants to start a business here.”

“Okay. They are forcing him?”

She shakes her head, “No. It’s not like that. It’s just that my parents don’t give a damn about my dream because I’m a girl who would eventually leave to stay with her husband after marriage. And he is *the son*, who would stay with them and take care of them, so he deserves to have the better thing even if he doesn’t want it. Ridiculous!”

I know. It is ridiculous. But I’m surprised to hear that *her* parents, who seem to be very supportive of their children, came out like my father, just in a different shape.

“My father calls me fatty cheese,” Areeba speaks up from across the room where she was standing, “He has never taken me to any of his friend’s house because I’m chubby.”

“But you are not chubby!” Ishita says.

Areeba smirks, “I know. But I didn’t know *that* when I was a child. I used to believe that I’m the chubbiest girl out there of whom her father is ashamed. Parents can be cruel, Ishita; without even acknowledging it, because they think they are entitled to hurt us just because they gave birth to us.”

“My father once laughed at me with his friends because I peed my pants in public,” I say, the memory is still fresh in my mind like it happened yesterday. “He dipped my face in the cake at my birthday party in front of people because I threw tantrums about the cake. I was four. Damn, I was only four. And I can continue with at least a hundred examples like that.”

Ishita firmly touches my hand, even in grieving, she tries to comfort me. I scoot closer to her, placing my head on her shoulder, “I know you are hurting Ishita, trust me. Parents have no idea that they can also break our hearts, the same heart built from them.”

Ishita stays quiet, I feel her wiping a teardrop from her face. Areeba climbs up on the bed and lays her head on my lap. We stay there on my bed, three girls, sharing one common thing among us— hearts shattered by our parents.

Girl's Night Out

It had been a week, I didn't talk to Hussain. I noticed him several times on the rooftop and orphanage front yard, though.

I didn't talk to him for two reasons- 1. He hurt me and, 2. I didn't have the heart to tell him the news of our moving out.

"An invitation came from the orphanage," Mom said, flipping pancakes.

It was Friday. Weekend. Friday meant no early rising, yummy breakfast, and lots of TVs.

"What invitation?" I asked.

"There will be a cultural event next week. The orphanage committee has invited everyone in the neighbourhood," she replied.

"I don't want to go."

"I heard Hussain is going to perform at the event."

That was something that made me interested in going.

"What is he going to do?" I asked.

"Poetry recitation, maybe."

I nodded.

“I’m cooking spaghetti today. Do you want to ask Hussain to join us over lunch?” She asked.

I wanted to, but it’d been a while since we didn’t talk.

“He is not my friend anymore,” I said.

“But he asks about you now and then.”

Hearing her, my heart leaped up. “He asked about me? What did he say?”

“Random stuffs... that he misses you.”

“I miss him too, Mom.”

“Then ask him to come today.” Mom smiled.

“ I will.”

It was a perfectly sunny weekend, and I had no human best friend to play with me. Even Nirjhor Bhai went to his hometown. It left me with Doggo and Mr. Dino. None of them could talk.

Bored me, took the Beauty and the Beast Disney book out of the shelf. Hussain once said he read a lot of books because it helped him to get lost in another world. I wanted to try his theory.

I sat down cozily on the couch outside in the yard. It’s a beautiful story of a beast in a castle and a girl named Belle. I liked those stories. I liked the Meena cartoon more than I liked Scooby- Doo. I liked books, TV shows and stories where girls ruled.

“Ellie! Isn’t it your dog?” I jumped up on my seat from this sudden query.

The lady from the next door was standing in front of me with Doggo beside her. She looked angry. Doggo looked sad, and I knew I was in

trouble.

I rose from my chair. "Yes. He is my dog. Why?"

"He peed again in front of our door," she seemed really annoyed. Though Doggo was potty trained, that was the second time he did it.

"I'm going to tell your dad. Where is he?"

And I was like—oh no! This news shouldn't reach my dad's ear, I was thinking.

"I'm really sorry. I will clean up where he peed," I requested.

Shaking her head, she said, "No. This needs to stop."

From the thought of what would happen to Doggo if my father got to know this, I was terrified. I won't be surprised if Baba beat him up. There was no way I could let it happen.

"He is a dog, and he is still young. He forgets it sometimes. Please forgive him," I plead with her.

But my pleading didn't melt her heart. Ignoring me, she walked inside. Baba was in the living room, watching TV. I was still standing outside with Doggo.

"What's the matter?" I heard baba's voice.

"Your dog again peed in front of our door." The lady replied. "Please do something this time."

Little me was thinking—why don't they get it? He is just a dog. People always throw their rubbish on the street. Why is she making it a big thing?

"I understand," Baba replied. And his words made me more scared because he never understood. "I will look into the matter."

"Thanks," the lady stepped outside. Throwing us a glare, she left.

"Ellie!" Baba called me from the living room. "Come here right now!"

I knew what would happen if I got inside now. I felt the urge to run away with Doggo. But I failed to do that. Baba was already in the front yard, staring at me from where he was standing.

“Get inside!” he said. Doggo and I trudged into the living room. Mom was also there.

“This is the second time he did it,” Baba said, shutting the door.

“He won’t do it again. I promise,” I replied with all the strength I could gather.

Instead of speaking, Baba kept measuring me and Doggo for a few minutes. Mom looked tense.

“Please let it go,” Mom pleaded to Baba. “It won’t happen again. She promised.”

I nodded, agreeing with her.

My eyes were fixed on Baba, to read his face. Doggo was standing beside me, quiet. He probably got a hunch that the meeting was about him. I was stroking his head, comforting him.

“This is the last chance. If he does that again, he leaves.” Saying that, Baba left the room.

I knelt to pull Doggo into a hug in relief. Mom smiled, looking at us, “You need to be careful Ellie. Your father won’t allow it next time.”

I knew that. Baba would never allow Doggo again in the house.

November 2018

“Let’s get out of here. We need fresh air.” I sit up on the bed. The idea has just struck me—why stay gloomy, if I can change it?

“I don’t wanna go anywhere,” Ishita says, covering her face with the blanket. Which really doesn’t suit her character.

“I’ll go,” Areeba leaps up from the bed and descends to the floor. Ishita groans. She isn’t left with much choice, though. “But where?” She asks.

“It’s not that late yet. We’ll roam around, maybe we’ll eat ice cream,” I offer.

Ishita groans again. “But I don’t want to eat ice cream.”

“You’ll feel much better, trust me.”

“Ugh, okay. Fine!”

By the time we are on the rickshaw, it’s 8:30 p.m. on the clock. I told my father that we were just going for the ice cream. Which is a half-truth. Another half is—We’re gonna roam around.

“Where to?” The rickshaw puller asks.

“TSC,” I reply.

TSC is the place we need right now. The lively atmosphere over there on this winter night is enough to cheer one up. Besides, there are a lot of street food options. Right now, we need that. Ishita needs that. Food makes everything better eventually.

We get out of the neighbourhood and the rickshaw starts moving towards Nilkhet. We leave Nilkhet behind and are now heading towards the TSC, Dhaka University campus.

As we are stuck in traffic, I notice the hospital on my left, where I used to take my mother for chemo. I feel an ache in my heart as the memories flood in. Areeba notices the hospital as well. She used to come with me sometimes.

“It’s the hospital where aunt Numayra used to take her chemo,” she says to Ishita, motioning at the hospital. Ishita looks up at the building. Then moves her eyes at me, “You are missing her na?”

I smile half-heartedly, and reply, “Every single day. There is not a second passed that I haven’t missed her.”

Hearing me, she presses my shoulder from back. “I pray to God that he makes it easy for you. Sometimes we forget that you have lost your mother not even three months ago.”

“I’m getting better day by day. You eventually accept that. You are gonna live your whole life with that hole within, like a companion,” I say.

She takes a pause then asks, “What do you do Ellie, when you miss her and it hurts too much?”

“I sleep. The only time it doesn’t hurt.”

I think of my mother every day. Wherever I go, whatever I do, even this street we are passing by, reminds me of her.

I remember going over this street with her several times. I remember going shopping with her; I remember her when I’m reading a book, lying down on my bed, and I remember her even when I’m drinking a glass of water. How can you not remember the person every moment with whom you have bonded even before birth? To me, she is still alive, somewhere in the past, inside my memory.

The rickshaw puller stops the rickshaw beside the street. We get off it, pay him and march towards the fuchka stall.

“Do you like fuchka Ishita?” I ask her.

She nods. I order two plates of fuchka for Ishita and Areeba and one plate of bhel-puri for me.

We take our seats beside the fuchka stall. “Ahh! The smell of winter,” Areeba says, inhaling the crisp air into her lungs.

I laugh seeing her. We both like the fall and winter season. Basically, all the seasons except summer. Dhaka city turns into a fire pit during summer, so there is absolutely no reason to like it.

“Do you like winter, Ishita?” I ask her.

She smirks. “Who doesn’t like winter in Bangladesh?”

“Monsoon is my most favourite,” I say, “Nothing can be compared to the earthy smell right after the rain.”

Talking about rain, Areeba tells Ishita about her slipping in the schoolyard. “I was probably thirteen. After school, as soon as I saw my mother waiting for me at the gate, I ran over the yard and slipped...in front of my crush. It was raining, and the ground was slippery,” she laughs.

“Poor you!” Ishita laughs as well. “What happened to your crush later on? Did you ever tell him?”

“Nope. I used to have a new crush every other week,” she says.

This is a fact. None of her crushes lasted more than a week.

“But her relationship is only going stronger than ever. It’s been four years,” I add.

Ishita seems amazed. “Wow. That’s great!”

Areeba shrugs us off. “Love dies, once you are married.”

“I don’t think so,” Ishita says, arching her brow. “I’ve seen my parents. They are biased toward my brother. That’s a different scenario, but they love each other as they always used to do. Nothing has ever changed.”

Areeba chuckles, “They’re lucky then.”

“I don’t think it’s the love that dies,” I say, “With age and experiences, we evolve. If the partners remain respectful to each other, they evolve

together. If not, they grow apart. It's—respect that dies. Thus, the end of marriage. I know this because I had heard from my mother that they used to love each other like crazy. It was respect that bid adieu first, from their relationship. So, they grew apart.”

“I agree,” Ishita says, nodding her head. The fuchkawala passes us our plates and we jump into it right away.

“Who wants kulfi?” Ishita asks as she is done with her fuchka. Both Areeba and I raise our hands. We love kulfi. She puts the plate away and starts walking towards the Kulfi van nearby.

She comes back holding three Kulfis in her hands.

“Let's walk and eat.” I get up from the chair, taking the kulfi from her hand, and start walking.

“How is Raiyan treating you?” Ishita asks, biting a side of the kulfi.

Areeba cocks her head towards me while walking, Yeah, tell us how he is treating you?” A devilish smile blooms on the corner of her lips. And there we go again. I'm blushing.

And it doesn't go unnoticed by Ishita, What happened? Why are you blushing?”

“Nothing,” I say immediately.

“Nothing?” Areeba mocks.

Ishita moves her head once in my direction and then again in Areeba's direction, completely clueless, What's going on?”

“Why don't you tell her?” Areeba winks.

“What's there to tell?” I argue and concentrate on my kulfi.

“Raiyan made you a bookshelf. They went to Hatirjheel to see the water show, held hands, and now Raiyan wants a movie night with you,” Areeba

announces.

I look at Ishita, scary as once upon a time she had a crush on him.

She looks quite shocked and forgets to eat her ice-cream. Then slowly turns to me, “He made you a bookshelf? HatirJheel and Movie night?” She asks, probably to be sure again.

I nod.

She chuckles. “Is it the same Raiyan we are talking about?”

“Yes, 100%,” this time Areeba replies.

Ishita forgets to blink, rather, she goes into a complete shock. I throw Areeba a death-stare. But she seems to be unfazed by it.

“Are you upset?” I ask Ishita, timidly.

She sets her eyes on me and looks confused, “Why would I be upset?” Then she gets it, “Oh, you are thinking, because of my long-gone crush on him, I would be upset that Raiyan likes you? You are so silly, Ellie.” She shakes her head.

“He probably likes me as a friend,” I state, though the confidence in my voice is not strong.

Ishita looks like she still needs some time to process it. “Raiyan made a bookshelf for you, Ellie! As far as I remember, he never did that type of thing for Tania. So, wake up!” She says, elbowing me. “So you are not upset?” I ask her. I really don’t want to hurt her feelings.

She turns around to face me and holds my shoulder with her hands, “Ellie, you once told me—if your friends are not proud of you, they are not your friends. If I’m upset that Raiyan, who is also a friend of mine, likes my other friend, which is you, then I’m not your friend. And I consider you a very good friend of mine.”

“Happy to hear that,” I smile.

“Yeah, girl, I love you too,” she rolls her eyes.

“Well, you two, stop being so dramatic,” Areeba says. She walks again.

“Quite a character development for Raiyan,” Ishita remarks. We three are walking through the field behind the Art building now.

“You told me earlier that he never did such a thing for Tania. Why? I thought he loved her a lot. He still loves her, I guess,” I ask Ishita.

“I don’t know,” she says, “They were best-friends, which was the main reason they started a relationship as Raiyan has trust issues about women. He can’t trust them unless it’s a friend. This makes me surprised that, how come he takes a great deal of interest in you in such a short time? Totally out of the character for him,” Ishita says, “And talking about love? Tania loved him a lot, but Raiyan was kind of off throughout the relationship.”

Maybe he is attracted to me, maybe he is counting me as one of his casual dates, “Is he considering me for a casual date?” I ask.

“He doesn’t make a bookshelf for causal chicks, he doesn’t help them with math. He doesn’t practice badminton with them. He never invited them to watch movies on TV at his home. So, no. He is not considering you as one of his casual dates,” Ishita says. She sounds confident about her opinion. Well, she knows him for a very long time, so it may be the truth.

“Can you tell me one thing?” Ishita asks me.

I nod.

“How do *you* really feel about him?” She asks as we are walking through the grass. I see all four eyes are fixed on me as she pops the question.

I suck in a breath, then let it out slowly. “I’m still confused about that place. But I’m telling you what I’m sure about.” They both nod.

“I can be the truest form of myself while I’m around him. I feel safe that he won’t judge me. I feel more than good each second I have passed with him till now. His presence calms me down and makes me feel better. I feel upset when he is upset. I like our little moments. And I feel butterflies in my chest seeing him.” There it is. I have just bared open my soul to these two.

They stop walking.

I stop walking.

Ishita turns to face me. She looks directly into my eyes and says, “Never break his heart, Ellie.”

I laugh, “It takes two hearts to fall for each other to break it.”

She chuckles and looks away for a moment, then places her both hands on each side of my shoulder, before coming up with the next words, “Eiliyah and Raiyan, have already fallen for each other. So, sit tight and enjoy this ride.”

The Man From The Past

Everyone was seated on the chairs in front of the stage. We all were waiting for the cultural event to start. Hussain was going to recite a poem today. I came with my mom.

That day, when I asked Hussain to have lunch with us, he agreed right away. We became friends again. He said he had been missing me. I forgave him, though he didn't share the secret he was keeping. I also couldn't share that we would be moving.

He used to seem sadder than he already was, for a while then. I asked him quite a few times. He said he was alright. But I knew he was not. He had been spending his time more inside the dormitory rather than playing with me. Not to mention, I caught Shanto a few more times going inside the abandoned house. When I shared this piece of information with Hussain, he wasn't excited anymore.

He said that he had asked Shanto about it. Shanto replied. He went there to spend some time alone.

I knew that adults needed time alone, never heard of any kid needing it.

The event had started. All the participants were standing in a corner of the stage, but there was no sign of Hussain.

“Where is he?” I asked my mom.

“He must be around. Probably getting ready.”

Sitting on my chair, I saw the event start with a stand-up comedy. Everyone was laughing at the jokes the boy was narrating on the stage. But I was in no mood to pay attention. I came here only to cheer Hussain. I wasn't bothered by the rest of the people.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I told my mom. Truth is, I didn't need to go to the bathroom. I need to find Hussain.

“Okay. Be quick.”

Leaving my chair, I walked to the opposite direction where the orphanage building was. The entire building was empty. I headed to the second floor as Hussain once mentioned he lived on that floor.

As I reached the second floor, I felt lost. There were lots of doors and no name plates on any of it.

I started with the very first one. It's locked.

Then the second one. Locked.

Then the next. It opened. And there was nothing but a broken desk and some old books inside the small store-size room.

I moved on to the next one. It opened too. It's a dorm room with six beds, but no one's there, so I shut the door.

Standing in front of the next door, I heard some whispering inside. I slightly opened the door and saw Hussain sitting on the lap of a man in black cloak—Jalil sir, their teacher. Hussain once said, Jalil sir used to give strict punishments. But there he was, sitting with Hussain on his lap.

“Hussain,” I spoke from the door. “Everyone’s waiting for you. They asked me to find you.” That’s a lie. But I needed to come up with something.

Hearing me, Jalil sir smiled. But Hussain didn’t. He looked aghast.

“I’m coming,” Hussain replied. He got down from Jalil sir’s lap and walked to me. Closing the door behind him, he said, “Let’s go to your rooftop.”

“But aren’t you going to perform?”

“I’m not feeling well.”

“What happened?” I asked him.

“I can’t tell you.” He replied.

I used to hate it when people said I can’t tell you. “I’m your friend. Tell me.”

He sighed. “I hate it here, Ellie. They do bad things to children.”

“I know. You told me once, that they don’t offer food on time. They make you wash your own clothes. And some boys are really rude. Especially that Shanto.”

“It’s not about food, washing clothes or those boys.”

I frowned. “Then what?”

“I don’t know. I feel so bad. Jalil sir does bad things to us.” He stopped then.

“What bad things? Does he beat you? But he is nice, right? You were on his lap today.”

“I don’t want to be on his lap. He took me on his lap to do bad things.” His face turned red.

“What kind of bad things?”

“I can’t explain.”

“He does the same bad things to Shanto?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes. That night I followed him. It was too late, so I didn’t wake you up. I followed him into the house. Jalil sir was also there. Then I asked Shanto after he returned. He was scared to tell me first. But he told me he doesn’t like what Jalil sir does to him in that house. He said, Jalil sir does those things to other students.”

I didn’t know what bad things he did exactly, but I was sure it’s nothing pleasant.

I reached my hand to find Hussain’s. “I’m so sorry, Hussain. I wish I could help you!”

Hussain’s eyes were fixed on the sky. Looking at the setting sun he said, “I hate living here, Ellie. I wish I was a bird!”

“I need to tell you something, Hussain.” I said. “But promise me you won’t be mad at me?”

Looking at me Hussain nodded.

“We are going to move out at the end of next month.” I told him finally. I didn’t want to hold it back any longer.

His brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

I sighed. “My father has been transferred to a different place. That’s the reason behind moving out. I tried to convince my mom to stay here, but she says it’s not possible.”

I could say from the look on Hussain’s face that this news struck him badly. He fell completely silent.

I took his hand in my hand. “I wish I could take you with me! I’m scared to leave you behind. These people are bad people.”

In reply, Hussain just squeezed my hand firmly. And at that moment, I knew I had just broken his heart.

Sarah heaves a sigh. “I have a feeling that this story is going to be really sad, Maa. I’m scared! This Jalil sir sounds horrible. Did he molest Hussain?”

I nod.

She gasps. “Now, I’m really scared.”

“Just hold on for a few minutes longer. It’s going to end soon.”

December 2018

We all are inside Nana Bhai’s car. Raiyan has borrowed it from him for the night.

We’re going to celebrate Raiyan’s being the champion in the University Badminton league for the third time in a row. He is going to graduate in January, so he was really eyeing the trophy. Though we all knew the trophy would go to him in the last round, the opponent was really giving him a hard time.

“Where are we going by the way?” I ask Raiyan. They weren’t sure of the place earlier.

“We are going to Digi-House first, then we’ll have dinner at Fire-on-ice, it’s nearby,” Ishita replies from the backseat.

“What is Digi-House?”

“It’s a gaming zone,” Raiyan replies, starting the engine. “You can play live-action games there. There is shooting, video games, also bowling, and

obviously VR show—which shouldn't be missed.”

“You mean indoor games?”

“Yeah. Indoor games.” Alif says.

This sounds quite exciting to me though, I've never been to a gaming zone before. I've seen people in the movies, playing with real-looking guns and shooting with it aiming the nozzle right at a TV screen—killing zombies, ghosts and so many other weird stuff.

Raiyan stops the car in front of a skyscraper. It was only half an hour's drive from our neighborhood.

Ishita, Alif, and I climb down from the car, and Raiyan drives it away to the underground parking lot.

I see Ishita's eyes suddenly gleaming up, seeing a guy walking towards us. I recognize him, her boyfriend- Shuvo, I have seen his photo on Facebook. He was supposed to join us too. He wraps his arm around Ishita's waist and hugs her as soon as he reaches us.

“Hi, you must be Eiliyah,” he extends his hand towards me, releasing Ishita from his arms.

I shake his hand, “Yep. Ishita talks a lot about you,” I say.

Ishita is standing beside him, beaming. “Finally you guys have met. It was long due,” she says.

I see Raiyan walking back from the parking lot.

“Hey Shuvo, how are you doing?” He reaches his hand to Shuvo.

“Great, man. Congratulations by the way.”

Raiyan flashes his grin. “Thanks, man. Let’s all get inside?” Raiyan says.

Raiyan then reaches his hand to me, “Shall we?”

Looking at his hand once then moving my eyes at him, I find him smiling. Rather than smiling back, I blush. Slowly I take his hand into mine. We all then walk through the gate and take the elevator to the 3rd floor.

Raiyan buys five entry tickets from the booth outside the door and we get in. It’s crazy inside: loud music, hell lot of people—gaming, chatting, eating popcorn. Even in the middle of December, it’s hot in here.

“I want to play a shooting game!” Ishita announces.

“As you say, my lady,” Shuvo says, putting his arm around her shoulder. They move to the shooting arena.

I smile, looking at them. They don’t seem like they are dating for a couple of months now. The chemistry is sparkling.

“What do you want to play?” Raiyan asks me.

“Bowling.” The bowling arena looked good to me. Besides, from watching movies, I always used to fancy bowling.

“Let’s go then.”

He buys three coins. With each coin inserted into the slot, you can play five times. There are six bowling machines. We take the fourth from the right.

“Have you ever played it before?” Raiyan asks.

I shake my head, “Never. I’ve played no indoor games. I’ve never done *a lot of* things in my life.”

“That’s wrong. You did a hell lot of things in your life,” he smiles. “Let me show you.” He inserts a coin inside the small slot and picks up the ball,

then aims it straight at the bowling pins ahead. Aaand bingo! All the pins fall down. We get a full point.

“Now, you try it,” he says, passing the ball to me.

“Sure,” I say, then take the ball from his hand, aim it as he did. Then roll it with full force.

But, nope! I didn’t make all the pins smash down like him. I groan, looking at him.

He laughs, “You did great. It’s your first time, come on.”

I know for sure, he is trying to console me. So I roll the ball again.

And...this time it smacks all of them down. I leap up, throwing my hands upward in the air, “Yes! I did it.” Raiyan laughs again.

We have successfully completed all our sessions and scored 370/400. I’m pleased.

We then move towards the shooting game arena, where Ishita and Shuvo are so busy killing people on the screen. After they are done, Ishita offers to go for VR. And here, I am, having no idea how it works. I have seen on TV that people wear goggles, riding a machine. But that’s all I know about it. I don’t know anything beyond that.

We buy four tickets for the VR and ride on it. Alif sees a girl in the food station and is now busy talking with her.

We four, sit side by side in a row, Ishita and me in the middle and Shuvo and Raiyan on each side of us. I see a seatbelt hanging from my seat.

“Why does it need a seat belt?” I ask.

“Put it on, Ellie. It’s going to be crazy,” Ishita says, winking at me.

“What do you mean?” I ask her cautiously, I know her version of crazy. Her crazy means- *insanely crazy*.

“You need Raiyan now,” she winks again.

I'm anxious. I know it's nothing like the Ferris wheel, but still, in my guts, I feel that something terrifying is coming.

The VR starts. And within a few seconds, I get why I need him now. It is virtual reality but it feels like more than reality. Right now I'm on a roller coaster over a mountain in the VR and there is a giant-sized python running after me. The roller coaster is sprinting like it may lose its balance anytime. It's crossing some rivers and oceans and gets inside a dark cave. Oh no! We have crossed a fire ring too. Every now and then the snake appears out of nowhere. I know it's not real yet I subconsciously grab Raiyan's hand tight.

"Scared?" Raiyan asks.

"I won't talk to any of you once it's over."

He laughs out.

"Aren't you feeling good, Ellie?" Ishita asks me, screaming.

"Why didn't you warn me?"

She laughs, "It's not real."

Well, that's the point. I know it's not real but yet, somehow the message is not reaching into my brain that it's not real.

After ten minutes, the show's over.

And this is the longest ten minutes in my entire life. I throw Ishita a death stare after it's over. She is grinning, seeing me mad.

"Ellie, sometimes, it's fun, you know. The adrenaline rush in your blood. It reminds us that our life was getting mundane," she says, patting my shoulder.

"Yeah. Keep your philosophy to yourself," I roll my eyes.

"Let's get out of here, I'm hungry", Alif says, he is back from the food station.

"Got her number?" Raiyan teases him.

“Added on FB. She is cute.” He grins.

“Your ex-GF is getting married soon, isn’t it Alif?” Ishita says, cocking her head from the side.

“Thank God for that. I’m a free man now! It’s been a while since I didn’t flirt with anyone.” saying that he walks out of the gaming zone.

The restaurant is just a walking distance of five minutes from Digi House. It’s a small restaurant but a cozy one. On one side, tables have been set and on another side, an array of booths. We take the booth as we are five people. Besides, the seat looks comfy.

The waiter arrives and takes the order. I’ve ordered Bolognese pasta, Ishita- grilled sandwich, Alif- fish and chips, Shuvo- a beef burger and Raiyan- Cashew nut salad.

The food will take fifteen minutes to come.

“Ellie, your eyeliner has smudged somehow,” Ishita says.

“Really?”

She nods.

“I don’t have a pocket mirror with me.”

“Go and fix it in the washroom,” she suggests.

“It’s in the back. I saw it earlier,” Raiyan says, pointing in the opposite direction.

I get up and walk towards that way. Passing the corridor, as I’m about to turn the knob of the ladies’ washroom, I feel someone’s hand on my shoulder.

I turn around and my brows get furrowed, “Aryan?”

“Yep. Long time no see, Ellie.” He flashes a smile. A smile I used to adore and now it doesn’t even flinch me.

“Not so long,” I say.

He is looking as fresh as mint in a red polo T-shirt. His hair is back brushed. Wearing a nice fruity perfume. A platinum ring is blinking around his ring finger.

“How is life?” He asks.

“Marvelous!” I reply.

“I can see that.” He scans me from head to toe. “You didn’t reply back to any of my texts.”

“Seriously? You expected me to reply to your texts after that insult?” I can’t help but laugh.

“I said sorry a thousand times,” he says. Then he looks at the booth where Raiyan and others are seated. “Seems like you have moved on pretty quickly!”

While he says that, his eyes are still fixed on the booth and I know exactly what he meant. He has seen us entering the restaurant holding hands.

Raiyan catches us talking in the corridor. He is staring right this way.

“You are right Aryan. I did move on. It was easy after the shitty way you broke up with me. All those years, for nothing. You wasted my freaking time.”

He smirks. How dare he smirks! “I wasted your time? Come on, Ellie. I fucking saved you. Everyone used to know you as a slut and after dating me, you got rid of your precious title.”

Is he joking? I start laughing at his pride. “Did you hear what you have just said? You are so full of yourself, aren’t you? I feel really bad for the girl you got engaged with, she has earned a prick for a lifetime.”

This one hits him right on his nerves. His nostrils flare and blood rushes to his face. “You called me a prick?”

I scoff. “Prick is actually a wrong word I have picked for you. You are an asshole, dipshit, a man-child.” Letting out those slangs, my heart feels lighter like a sack of sands has lifted from my shoulder. I smirk and turn around to walk to my booth.

But I can’t. He grabs my hand from behind.

“Let go of my hand Aryan,” I say looking directly into his eyes.

But he doesn’t let go. Rather his grip tightens. “Who’s he? Who is it that you have moved on so quickly?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Is he your boyfriend?” The veins on his forehead twitch. He is holding my hand so tight that it’s started hurting.

“It’s hurting, Aryan,” I warn him. He still doesn’t let go.

“Leave her hand right now!” I turn my head to find Raiyan beside me.

Aryan scowls, “Otherwise, what macho man? Gonna punch me?”

The men I have met in my life till now, I found Raiyan as the calmest one and cool-headed. Never until now, have I seen him losing his cool. But looking at him, I anticipate he may lose it anytime now.

“This is the last time I’m warning you. Leave her hand otherwise you won’t be able to leave this place in one piece.”

Staring at Raiyan and me, like he would devour us any moment, he finally loosens his grip and leaves my hand.

Raiyan holds me by my arms. “Let’s go, Ellie.”

We turn around to walk to our booth.

“Yeah, you need a bodyguard now, eh?” Aryan shouts from behind. No Aryan, you really need to shut your mouth now.

Ignoring him, we keep moving.

“Fucking slut!”

Raiyan halts in the midway. Letting go of my hand, he spins around. In a flash, he flies to Aryan and throws him a punch. Then another punch and then another.

I freeze right where I’m standing. Alif and Shuvo run toward them. Some other people in the restaurant also gather around them when Raiyan has held Aryan against the wall, grabbing him by his shirt.

“I warned you, you won’t be leaving this place in one piece! You didn’t listen. How dare you call her slut?” He then throws a punch at his stomach.

As he raises his hand again to smack Aryan, Alif and Shuvo grab him and drag him away. Ishita is standing beside me. “Fucking hell!”

“I’ll beat the shit out of you if you ever come near her.” Raiyan shouts.

Wiping the blood from his lips, Aryan throws him a glare, then leaves the spot and heads to the exit. Alif and Shuvo are still holding Raiyan. People around us are whispering. Everyone is scared to talk out loud.

I slowly walk to Raiyan. His breathing is rapid, eyes red, the knuckles of his hand swelling. He is not looking at me. I gesture Alif and Shuvo to release him from their hold.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say holding his arms.

After reaching home, I straight take him to his room. Taking out the first-aid box from the cabinet, I clean the swollen areas on his knuckle. He is quiet now, watching me dabbing savlon cream on his bruise like a good boy who was in trouble a few hours ago.

“Is it stinging?” I ask him.

He nods.

“Sorry. But savlon stings. It always stings. I still don’t get it why do they make something for healing which is gonna sting.”

He smiles quietly.

I pack up the box and put it away.

“I’m sorry, Ellie,” he says, his eyes downward, on his feet.

I sigh. I sighed not because I’m mad at him. I sighed because all of this happened because of me. “I am sorry. If I didn’t call Aryan names, he wouldn’t be so hyped up.”

Raiyan looks up at me. “He was already hyped up. Stop blaming yourself.”

“How dare he hurt you, call you slut!” he says under his breath. “I would have ripped his tongue out.”

I sit down beside him. Taking his hand in mine, I say, “He is gone now. And I thank God that he is gone from my life forever. I thank God that our relationship didn’t last long. But hey! I didn’t know that you have a fighter inside you.” I tell him.

He chuckles. “I wasn’t always a fighter. Then I learned to fight, learned to take a stand for myself, for my loved ones.” He pauses, then says, “I wouldn’t just stand there and let him say bullshit about you, Ellie. I can’t do that. He was lucky that he got away with just some punches.”

I nod. “I know.”

And just like that, I know now, that life takes people, and things away only to replace them with something better, something bigger, and something you would be grateful for.

Fallen

December 2018

It's not like I'm going over Raiyan's place for the first time. It's not even my second. But I'm nervous today.

I've already brushed my hair five times, reapplied kohl thrice, and checked several times if my lipstick is in the right place. I spent fifteen minutes deciding what to wear and finally ended up wearing the black chiffon salwar kameez. I look my best in it.

Damn, my mind is playing a crooked game with me. I'm being extra cautious about how I look today. God bless me!

I pack my books in my satchel and go to the kitchen to retrieve the cake from the fridge, which I've baked today early in the morning. The cake was long due for him. He even reminded me of that. I baked a chocolate-mocha cake with dark chocolate ganache on top.

I box the cake carefully in a round Tupperware box, pick up my satchel and leave, completely disregarding aunt Rubina in the background who was watching me the whole way from the dining hall. She asked me for whom I baked that cake. I didn't lie.

I said, "Raiyan," and she looked totally pissed about it. She was murmuring something I didn't hear.

As I've crossed the lawn and was about to knock on the front door, that fluttering is back. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then knock on the door.

The door is swung open at the second knock by a boy, who is not Raiyan and who is not our age. He is probably seven or eight.

"Who are you?" I frown.

He frowns back, "Who are *you*?"

My right brow slightly arches, and I peer through the door space into the living room. "Where is Raiyan?"

"Bhaia, is in the shower," he replies.

Bhaia? Raiyan doesn't have any siblings. "Raiyan doesn't have any brother," I say to him.

He narrows his eyes and says, "I'm his brother. Ask him if you want."

As I'm about to come up with a reply, Nana Bhai appears behind him. "Ellie! Come inside dear." He smiles and steps aside to let me in, but the boy is still standing at the door.

"Mahin, let her in. She is your brother's friend." I see the boy smirking as Nana Bhai has mentioned *your brother* in his sentence. But he steps aside reluctantly.

“He is Ayaaz’s son. Her mother dropped him here an hour ago. She’s been off shopping and there was no one at home to watch over him,” Nana Bhai says.

“See, I’m his brother,” Mahin grins, which looks exactly like Raiyan’s. I smile back. So this is Mr. Writer’s son.

“What’s that in your hand?” Mahin asks me pointing towards the Tupperware box.

“It’s a cake,” I reply.

His eyes go round. “Can I see it?”

“No. Not now. Raiyan needs to see it first. Your *brother*,” I tease him.

He makes a face but says nothing. He then goes on to watch TV, which was already on.

Nana Bhai laughs, “Raiyan asked you to bake a cake?” He asks.

I nod.

“His grandmother used to bake every week for him. Cake is his favourite.”

“I hope it’s good, and he likes it,” I say.

Nana Bhai laughs again, “Of course he will,” then he takes a step forward and says, “Raiyan is lucky to have you, Ellie. He talks a lot about you. I have never seen him praising a girl of that magnitude before.”

I smile, eyes on my feet.

“You go, wait in his room. He is probably in the shower,” Nana Bhai scurries me away.

I nod at Nana Bhai and head upstairs with the cake box. I want to show him the cake before I show it to anyone else. I want to see the reaction when he first takes a bite from it.

His room is the first one in the hallway. The door is not open, nor is it locked, as I turn the knob and step inside. His room is spacious like mine with the same amount of furniture as my room—a twin bed, a four-door-built in-closet, a big mirror fixed against the wall in a corner of the room, a bookshelf, and a desk with a chair to study. The only exception is, that his room has a giant size TV fixed on the wall right opposite the bed.

The drapes on the windows are drawn, and the twin bed is neatly made with a white bed cover. I hear the shower running, coming from the bathroom.

“Raiyan, I’m here,” I yell so that he can hear me.

His reply comes after a few seconds. “Can you wait here, please? It’ll just take five minutes,” he yells back.

“Sure.”

I drag the chair aside and sit on it, placing the cake box on the desk. I’m in no mood to do maths today. I’ll talk him out of it anyhow.

I don’t know if he’ll like my cake. I’m tense, though I’ve always been confident about baking. My cake has always turned out well so far.

“Ellie!” I spin around to find him peeking through the bathroom door. “Is it okay for you if I get out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel? My clothes are in the closet,” he asks hesitantly.

“Yeah, sure.” Which I immediately regret, seeing the bottom part of the body wrapped in a white towel and absolutely nothing in the upper part as he steps outside the bathroom. Water is dripping from his hair to his shoulder. His hair is wet, his face is wet, God! His body is wet.

I look away because he looks insanely hot. He’s looking so damn hot that I’m blushing from head to toe. He has probably noticed that. He eyes

me cautiously to check if I'm comfortable and picks up a T-shirt from the closet.

"I'll wait outside," I say, looking in the other direction, to give him privacy so that he can put on his trousers.

He nods, "Sure."

I step outside the room and close the door behind me. God! Why did I tell him it's okay to step outside in a towel? Ellie, you are losing your freaking mind, girl. Wait, did he think I *wanted* to see him in a towel? Geez! I hope not.

"Ellie, you can come inside now," he says, keeping the door ajar.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I'm staring at him like I've seen a ghost. And it doesn't go unnoticed by him, "What happened? Anything wrong? I'm so sorry if I made you uncomfortable," he is clearly concerned. I can see that. But how can I explain to him I actually blushed, seeing him in a towel, uncomfortable? No way.

I get inside the room, dismissing his concern, "No! You looked hot!"

Shit! My mouth. I immediately put my hand over my mouth as I say it.

But he seems amused. The amusement has taken over the concerned look on his face. He doesn't grin, rather a fiendish smile appears right in the corner of his lips, leaving him looking more attractive.

I gauge him head to toe. He is looking extremely handsome today in a powder blue t-shirt and black trousers, his hair still wet. He actually always looks good somehow, even when he gets all sweaty after our badminton practice.

"Hot, huh?" He smirks. "So this is what's going on in your mind?" I sense the tease in his voice. His eyes are gleaming with the amusement he is

having.

I roll my eyes and go near the desk to pick the cake box up. I extend the box towards him, “Open it.”

He stares at the box for a second, then glances up and asks, “What’s inside?”

“Open the box,” I motion at the Tupperware box.

He takes it from my hand and opens the lid. He takes a moment before he finally flashes his grin. “The cake! You finally baked it.” I nod, smiling.

He then keeps staring at the cake for a good ten seconds in awe and then swipes up a dash of buttercream from the side of the cake and licks it. His eyes go wide as soon as he tastes the cream. “Ellie! It tastes so good!”

I grin at him. I’m relieved that he likes it.

He then places the cake box back on the desk and looks at me. He smiles half-heartedly. “Ellie,” he says, his voice soft and gaze fixed on me. God! I can feel the fluttering again.

He steps closer. Then more closer. He pauses, leaving no space between us this time. My stomach twists from the proximity of him. He brings his lips to my ear and whispers, “Thank you.”

I won’t lie that I’m not baffled by his sudden move. I am. And as much as I’m bemused, I love it. Being closer to him. Feeling his heavy breath falling on my neck.

He then wraps his arms around my arms and hugs me tight. I smile and place my hand on his back.

There’s warmth in the way he is holding me right now. It’s a touch of care, intimacy, and love? I don’t know. But the way he has held me in his arms it’s literally screaming from each inch of his body that it’s not just a

quick, simple hold, it's personal, it's intimate and he just wants to hold me in his arms a little longer.

He loosens his right arm and places his palm against my cheek, looking directly into my eyes. His eyes are saying a thousand things, which only the mind can interpret.

And here I am. I don't want him to let go of me just yet. I want to stay in his arms right now. I want to freeze the moment right here, and I want to shut all the doubts.

And I do. I let myself melt into his hold and my gaze softened more as the eyes set on him.

He brings his lips against my forehead and plants a soft, longer kiss there. My eyes fall shut, feeling every emotion I'm going through, each of it.

It's been a long time since I've had a plethora of emotions all at once. I feel my chest trembling and I suck in a breath and our eyes meet again. His eyes get locked with mine. He brushes my cheek with his thumb, then places his lips against my cheek, leaving a gentle kiss there.

He rests his forehead against mine and wraps his hands around my waist, and smiles. A smile that is enough to turn the butterflies into a storm inside me. I forget to breathe. I move my gaze from his eyes to my feet.

"Ellie!" He whispers softly.

"Hm?"

"Do you know how breathtakingly beautiful you are?" he says. His hands are still wrapped around my waist, my eyes are still fixed on my feet, and our foreheads are still in a joint.

I smile quietly.

"The moment my eyes met yours, I knew I had fallen," he says.

“In the bookstore? When you smiled big, seeing me?” I ask.

He shakes his head, then says, “No, long before that.”

It only means the night we met at the window. I chuckle, “Really?”

He nods. He then releases my waist from his hold gently and again takes me in his arms. I bury my face in his chest. I feel so secure and safe in his arms that I can stay there forever.

“Ellie?” He says.

“Hm?”

“Do you know another thing?”

“What?” I whisper, resting my head against his chest.

“It’s impossible for me to love a person who is not you,” he sounds so vulnerable that his voice cracks.

I move my head away from his chest to look up at him. There’s a sign of despair in his eyes. The Raiyan I know is confident, strong, and full of life while at the same time, calm-natured, patient, and never in despair.

I have rarely seen him vulnerable. Seeing the melancholy in his eyes now makes my heart sore. Am I falling for him, too?

Looking at him, feeling his sadness as mine, feeling his vulnerability as if it belongs to me, makes it only obvious that—I’ve already fallen for him, probably a long ago even when my heart was not ready to fall.

I hold his face in my palms and say, “Then don’t.”

As I say those words to him, his eyes flicker up.

His eyes are grazing over my face. He brings his fingers over my lips, brushing them gently before leaning in to press his lips against mine. He’s kissing me slowly and gently as if he is in no rush to let me go yet, as if the time stands still here as if this moment is all we have. His fingers are running through my hair and his body is thrust against mine.

As we kiss, my whole life has just turned upside down. My brain has stopped functioning. I'm lost somewhere far away from here. Maybe this is what falling feels like. It just swoons you away and blows your mind.

"Raiyan." I whisper as his lips are still grazing mine.

"Hm?"

"I've fallen too. For the first time in my life, I've fallen." As I say it, I can feel the magnitude of these words in my heart. "All my life I've been waiting for this emotion to feel, for this moment to come," I say to him, as he detaches himself gently to face me. "And as it is here today, I want to capture each nanosecond with every breath I take, with each time my heart beats."

He places his hand on my cheeks and strokes a strand of my hair away. Then placing his fingers underneath my chin, he says, "And I'll make sure your waiting was worthwhile Ellie; I'll make sure I'm worthy of a girl like you."

I smile looking at him, "You already are." I reply, touching his cheek, "More than worthy."

He takes my hand and brings those to his lips and kisses it. I pull him closer to me and hold him as tight as I can.

We stand there holding each other like we don't give a damn about the time.

We slowly pull away and smile at each other, taking in everything that happened to us. "Damn, Ellie," he says, looking at me.

"What?" I ask him, arching my brow.

He shakes his head. "You are something, you know that?"

I laugh. "I should say the same thing to you. You are something, Raiyan Abdullah." Then I pinch his nose and turn to the desk, leaving him smiling

more.

“Let’s go to the kitchen and slice it up. Your brother was dying to see the cake,” I tell him. He laughs, “You met him?”

“Yep. I pissed him off though, by saying *‘Raiyan doesn’t have any brother,’*” I say, picking the cake box up.

He laughs hearing that, “Little devil!”

We then head downstairs to the kitchen. As soon as we reach the kitchen, we find Mahin in there, drinking water. His eyes get wide, seeing the cake in my hand.

“Can I have a piece now?” He begs. Raiyan and I both laugh out loud.

“What will you give me if I let you eat it?” I tease him. He seems to get serious about it. “I’ll give you my little yellow car.”

I stroke his hair and pat his shoulder. “That sounds like a good deal.”

Raiyan pulls out a knife from the cupboard and hands it to me. I slice the cake into pieces. Keeping a few pieces out, I throw the other pieces into a plastic box and put them inside the fridge. As I give two pieces of cake to Mahin, he leaps up, “Whoa! That’s two!” he screams out. I smile at him.

“Say thanks to Ellie,” Raiyan reminds him.

He then turns to me and grins, “Thanks, Ellie.” I pinch his cheeks, “That’s okay.”

Mahin ducks out to the living room, leaving both of us alone to ourselves.

Raiyan is smiling at me wickedly across the kitchen counter where he is seated.

“Why that smile, huh?” I ask him, dancing my brows.

He doesn't reply, rather keeps scanning me with that smile all over his face. I place a piece of cake on a plate, taking a seat in front of him on the counter stool without breaking my gaze.

He then rises from his stool and walks to me. I forget to breathe as he places his hand on the back of my head and starts running his fingers through my hair. He pulls me closer, leaning in to kiss me on the lips.

“It's hard not to kiss you when you're around,” he says, kissing me. “You have no idea for how long I wanted this,” he says as he gently pulls away, leaving me blown again.

“Wanted what? To kiss me? Holding me? Or saying those things you said to me?” I ask him, smirking.

He flashes a playful smile and says, “all of it.”

I glance away. It's so hard to look at him when he smiles like that.

“You are being very shy around me today,” he is back at his teasing again.

“Well, I'm a shy girl,” I reply, knowing that there is no word called *shy* in my dictionary. But I'm blushing a lot nowadays around him. It's not unnoticeable.

He laughs quietly, then moves his eyes on his plate to eat the cake.

“Which movie are we going to watch today?” I ask him.

“Your choice. I've Netflix. You can choose from there,” he replies.

“Okay... so I've the upper hand in selecting movies?” I ask him quizzically.

He stares up at me and says, “You'll always have the upper hand over me over anything.”

I can't stop but blush again. I've been blushing so much these last few days that I think my cheeks are permanently red now. It will never need a blush on.

He then quickly finishes his cake and washes the dishes. "Let's go," he holds my hand and together we head to his room.

He locks the door behind us and turns the TV on. We climb onto the bed and draw the blanket over us. He pulls me closer to him as I rest my head against his chest.

I like the perfume he is wearing. It smells like the first rain after a hot humid day. I have never felt this level of comfort with any guy before, though there was only one—Aryan, and not even Aryan made me so warm and cozy around him the way I feel around Raiyan.

Damn! I've never even watched a movie curling up with someone like this. This is going to be the first time. Seems like I have a lot of firsts with him. My first bike ride, going to see the Water-dance, he is someone who made me an entire bookshelf; I have become someone who baked a cake for the first time for a guy, and now—this.

"Raiyan," I whisper.

"Yes, Ellie."

"I've never cozied up with someone like I'm with you right now," I say, circling my finger on his chest.

A smile forms on his lips, he then rolls me onto my back, hovers over me, sliding his fingers through mine, he says, "Trust me, Ellie, you make me feel so many things at once that no one is ever capable of."

Hearing him, my lips curl into a smile. He brings his hand close to my cheek, stroking a lock of hair from my face. He brings his lips against my neck and kisses there gently.

“God Ellie! You are addictive!” His voice is so low and smooth, but enough to set fire to my skin.

“Ellie?” He whispers.

“Hm?”

“Don’t you ever hold the thought of leaving me, okay?” He brings his lips next to my ear again. I move my stare back at him. His stare is so sharp that it can pierce each cell of my skin.

“Never.” My voice is low and my eyes are fixed on him.

He smiles looking at me. Pinching my cheeks, he then asks, “Which movie my Ellie wants to watch now?”

I almost squeal as he calls me *my Ellie*. Gosh! I’m behaving like a teenager.

“I like it when you call me my Ellie, Raiyan,” I say.

He tightens his hold around me by squeezing me to his chest, his voice strong as he speaks, “You’ve always been *mine*, Ellie. Hold no doubt about that.”

Unscathed. Undamaged. Unbroken

After a few days, coming back home from school, I found everyone sitting in the living room. Mom was crying.

Something happened.

I put my school bag down on the sofa and the red belt Doggo used to wear caught my eyes: it was kept on the coffee table. A chill ran down my spine.

“Where is Doggo?” I asked.

Mom looked at me, wiping a teardrop off her face. Seeing her crying, I forgot to breathe.

I called out his name. “Doggo! Ellie’s home. Come out, boy!”

As I was waiting there for him, I didn’t see any tiny dog running out of my room, wagging his tail. It was hard to believe. I called him again, “Doggo! Come out now!”

But he didn’t.

Nirjhor Bhai stood up and walked to me, “Ellie.”

“Where is Doggo, Nirjhor Bhai?”

Nirjhor Bhai didn't answer.

"Why aren't you answering me?" I shouted.

"Doggo is gone." Baba says.

"What do you mean by gone? What did you do to him?" I said weakly. I felt like someone had put some lumps inside my throat.

"He peed again in front of our neighbour's door. It was time for him to leave finally. I put him in a sack and left him far away from here...."

"Noooo...you can't do that Baba," I cried out and didn't want to hear whatever he wanted to say. "Why did you do that? He is just a dog!" I screamed.

Nirjhor Bhai tried to hold me, but pushing him aside, I ran out of the house. I didn't want anyone near me.

My Doggo, my little Doggo was gone. He was snatched away from me. My whole world was crashing down.

"Ellie!" I heard Hussain calling me from behind. But I didn't stop. I kept running.

"Ellie! Stop," Hussain finally caught me and held my hand tight.

Turning around, I dropped on the sidewalk. "My doggo, Hussain."

"What happened?"

"Baba left him far away from here. He is gone forever, Hussain. I wasn't even here while it was happening." Covering my face, I started crying.

Sitting beside me, Hussain held me and pulled me closer. He rubbed my head to console me. But he didn't know that nothing in the world could take away the pain. I had just lost my first ever best friend. No one could ever replace him.

"Why is my father so cruel, Hussain? What was Doggo's Fault?"

“People can be cruel sometimes, Ellie.”

“Doggo won’t survive without me.” Doggo’s lost, innocent face flashed in my mind, which was looking for me. It was hard to imagine how heartbroken he was then. How betrayed he was feeling against me. The home he used to think of as his home, the family he used to love as his family- had broken his heart into a thousand pieces, and being his best friend, I did nothing. I just left him to be lost.

That was the day I stopped believing that humankind is the greatest creation of God.

Sarah is staring at me with eyes welled up with tears. “This is the reason you don’t want to adopt a dog anymore.”

I nod.

“Because you were so heartbroken from the incident that you couldn’t build up the courage to adopt another. I get that now,” she says.

I sigh. “You’re correct. But let me know if you want to adopt a dog. We’ll arrange that for you. Dogs are the best. They understand their human friend in a way that no one is capable of.”

Staying silent for a few seconds, Sarah says, “I don’t know how I would console you, Maa.”

“Oh! I’m more than fine now,” I say, waving my hand. “Don’t worry about me, sweetie.”

She squeezes my hand. “You’re really strong! As a child, it’s a lot to go through. But why didn’t you tell me this story earlier?”

Looking at her eyes, I reply, “Because, the story gets darker and you are sixteen now; not a child anymore. Now’s the perfect time to tell you everything about it.”

December 2018

“Your house is full of books, Ellie!” Hussain says in wonder, walking around my room. I’m sitting on the edge of my bed, dangling my feet from there.

“You can take as many as you want,” I say, smiling.

He turns around to face me, surprised, “You won’t mind?”

I shake my head. “No. You are one of my best friends. Why would I mind?”

Hearing me, a smile forms on his lips. “Thank you, Ellie.”

I shrug.

I like him. I would have given away all my books if he wanted.

“Will you come over tonight? I’m holding a book reading party in my tent,” I say, pointing at the kid’s tent kept in a corner of my room.

He stares at it for a second. “Party? Lots of people will come, Ellie?”

I laugh out, “No silly! Only you, Doggo, Mr. Dino, and I.”

Hussain seems to be relieved hearing that it’s going to be only us. But he looks scared again. “What if Jalil sir finds out that I sneak out?”

“He won’t. You’ll not stay the whole night. Only an hour or two.” I assure him,

He nods. I’ve convinced him. I always somehow convince him to sneak out sometimes to read with me at night, when everyone goes to sleep.

It’s 12:00 on the clock. Hussain, Doggo, Mr. Dino, and I- we all four are reading books inside my tent. I’m reading Bambee, Hussain is reading Peter Pan and Mr. Dino is reading- how to be a good dinosaur. Though I’m

feeling sleepy, I keep reading. I like our reading party a lot so I don't want it to be over just yet.

"You are sleepy, Ellie. Should I leave?" Hussain says, putting his book aside.

"It's okay. Thirty minutes more, then we'll end the party."

He nods in consideration.

I don't know how long we had been sleeping inside my tent, but as I wake up in the middle of the night, I check the clock on the wall- 3:30 in the morning.

I flip aside and find Hussain sleeping peacefully beside me with a book open over his chest. I start shaking him to wake up. If he doesn't go back to his room in the orphanage and if Jalil sir finds out, he will punish him again.

Hussain sits up, rubbing his eyes, "What's the time Ellie?"

I yelp. "It's 3:30."

Hussain straightens up and fear lurks in the corner of his eyes. "I need to go," he says, standing up.

I stand up too and walk him to the main door of ours through the dining room. I click the door open slightly and let him slip out of it. "Best of luck," I whisper.

I know he is scared right now. Because Jalil sir is scary and he gives the worst kind of punishments, Hussain said. He tiptoes through the front yard then climbs up the half wall which separates the orphanage from our house.

Before jumping down, he turns around to wave at me. I wave back at him and shut the door. My pulse is racing as I press Mr. Dino tight against my chest when I turn around to find my father in front of me.

He doesn't seem pleased at all right now. He is glaring at me from the doorway of the dining room. I get frozen where I'm standing.

Slowly, he comes near me and slaps me hard on my face.

I cry out.

I see my mom entering the room. "Don't hit her," she screams. But it doesn't matter to my father. He hits me anyway again. I feel a salty taste on my lip. Blood's coming out.

"Your daughter let that orphan boy in again in the middle of the night after thousands of warnings," Baba says with utter disappointment.

Though, it's all so confusing to me. Why is it such a big matter if Hussain was here? Why does he get angry whenever he sees me with Hussain? Hussain is a good boy. But my father doesn't understand this. He is always mad at me. I somehow always let him down.

"They are just children", my mother begs, as she always does. And my father is never convinced. He grabs my hand and panic surge me as I know what's going to happen next.

He drags me through the living room. I'm trying to hold on to anything that my hands get on. He is dragging me through the living room to the dining hall, from the dining hall to their bedroom, and then stops until we reach in front of the bathroom. I look at the bathroom and start screaming. I know what he will do next as he is doing it as a punishment since I was barely four.

He throws me inside the bathroom, turns the light off, locks the door from outside, and leaves me inside screaming and begging. He always leaves me there in the darkness, hours after hours. None of my beggings is ever enough to melt him.

My mother keeps begging him, “Don’t do it. She is just a child. She is your daughter...” And I keep screaming and screaming until I bleed out in a cough.

I wake up and find myself beside Raiyan, wrapped in his arms. Another nightmare, but I immediately exhale a sigh of relief at the sight of Raiyan. He is sleeping, facing me, his chest is rising and falling in a peaceful composure like there’s no rush.

We fell asleep watching the movie. I bring my face closer to his face and leave a prolonged kiss on his forehead.

Then my mind goes back to my nightmare. Hussain appeared in my dream after a long time today. He is not a frequent visitor as he used to be once upon a time. Which is a good thing because it still hurts thinking of him, thinking of how he just vanished, thinking of how he broke my heart the first time. He just shattered all the trust I was left with in human beings. It took a long time for me to snap out of it. So, Hussain, you better stay at a bay, maintain a safe distance from me.

I pick up my phone to check the time- it’s 9:00 in the evening. And I’m hungry. I left a piece of cake on the plate over his study desk earlier. So, I put Raiyan’s arm aside slowly so that it doesn’t wake him up and climb out of the bed, tiptoeing to the desk. I drag the chair out, take a seat and reach out for the plate.

Looking around, I see some colorful notebooks, pads and a penholder kept in a corner of the desk and an ashtray in another corner. His notebooks

have a really nice cover on top. I saw him writing in one of them once. I pick up the top one, and swing it open to see which company has made it.

As my eyes wander to find the brand name, it gets stuck on the name written on top of a write-up: **Eiliyah**

Hey, it's my name!

What is he writing that is named after me?

I brush my eyes over the write-up, it seems like a story but I feel like I'm breaching his privacy so I decide not to read. I hate to invade people's private space.

As I'm about to shut it off, I notice the date written in the page's date space- 10th January, 2015. And my eyes get frozen right there. It's a story named after me which was written on 10th January, 2015? Three years back? A time when we even didn't know each other.

I know he writes. He even has a blog. He writes for SHOUT. But why would he write a date beside my name when we hadn't even met. Each and every brain cell of mine is racing right now but I'm unable to put the pieces together.

Has he written the date wrong? Even if he did so, even if he has written a story about me in the past few days *since* we met, it should be dated with October or November in the month section, because next January is still in the future and we didn't know each other in any past Januarys of my life. How did he write the whole date wrong?

"Ellie!" I jump out of the chair and tuck the notebook away, hearing him behind me.

He has woken up and is rubbing his eyes though still laid on the bed. "What are you doing?" He asks, yawning.

I turn around, motioning to the plate, "I was hungry, so, ate the cake."

He nods and yawns again. I just hope that he didn't see me touching that notebook.

"I need to drink water," I say and immediately step outside of the room, shutting the door behind me.

God! I really need water. As I'm heading to the kitchen downstairs, my mind wanders back to his notebook again.

The name. The date. The write-up.

Should I ask him or should I wait? Was he ever going to tell me that he has written something after me? Wait, is it a surprise for my birthday because it's due in January. Shit! The date: it's my birthday- 10th January.

But what about the year?

The day, the month, and the year- nothing adds up. My head is hurting right now, and the more I'm thinking about it. I reach the kitchen, pour myself a glass of water, and drink it in a gulp.

"You are looking like a ghost", I jump up and turn around to find Mahin sitting on the kitchen stool, staring at me. I take a deep breath and exhale it slowly. My face is very telling. Even Mahin, a little boy, noticed that I'm perplexed right now.

I press my forehead with the tip of my fingers- the nightmare, Hussain, and this mysterious write-up. I hate mystery and up there, one is lurking from the notebook.

I exhale another deep breath. I should give the thought a rest. I should wait for him to bring up the subject. So, Ellie, stop overthinking, and let's wait. If he doesn't say anything to me about it, I'll dig it out.

“Everything okay?” Raiyan enters the room, he has probably freshened up as the trace of sleep is all gone from his eyes. “You almost ran away from the room,” he says.

I force a smile on my face. “Yep.” But I can tell from the look on his face that he is not convinced of my *yep*.

“She was looking like a ghost. A white ghost,” Mahin speaks up. He is still here, sitting on the stool, a tab in his hand.

Raiyan then gets closer to me. Touching my arm he asks, “You fell asleep. And you were quite disturbed while sleeping. Now, your face looks flushed out. What happened Ellie?”

I shrug. “Nothing. Just a nightmare and someone reappeared in my dream today after so long.” I say, omitting the notebook part. That’s a discussion for another day. I’m still processing it.

He frowns, “Who?”

“Hussain,” I say, letting out a sigh. “He was in my dream after a long time. We were having this book reading party in my dream and then we fell asleep. He left at midnight. And then...” Well, I don’t want to get into that part either. It’s one of my buried wounds I deny digging out.

I look directly into Raiyan’s eyes, which seems wary right now. Placing both of my hands around his neck I smile, “Forget it. Just another nightmare. I’ve lots of them. If I start talking about those now, days, weeks and months will pass but my story won’t end.”

He doesn’t smile. His eyes fixed on mine. “I want to hear your story,” he says, his voice firm as it wasn’t an urge. It’s what he is asking me to do. But I don’t know if I’m ready to tell the darkest parts of my life yet. “I’ll tell you. But not today,” I tell him.

He sighs then glances away for a moment before looking at me again, “Okay. But I really want to hear, remember that. You’ll tell me whenever you’re ready, okay?”

I nod. I want to know you too, Raiyan. I want to know you better. I want to know about your life before me. I want to know about the write-up. I want to know about everything.

“Can I have another piece of cake,” Mahin says by letting us know that he still exists in the room.

Raiyan lets go of me and walks to Mahin. “Not anymore. Two is enough for one day. Your mom is on the way, so pack your things up,” he hurries him up from the stool and shoos him away from the room.

“I should get going too,” I say from the other side of the kitchen.

“Yeah, sure. Let me walk you home.”

I like this little part of us- him walking me home which is just ten feet away from his gate. It’s kind of our thing. And he doesn’t move an inch from our gate, until I shut the door.

Today he does the same. Right now, we are standing outside our gate, facing each other, reluctant to move. “Don’t go,” Raiyan Groans.

I scrunch my nose, “I know. But I have to.”

“I’ll let you go on one condition,” as he says, his eyes gleaming.

“What?” I frown.

He steps closer to me and replies, “You’ll be over my place, beside me, first thing in the morning.”

I know he is not kidding as he looks determined. I laugh again. Well, this side of him is new. He never demanded anything until this moment. And I like him more now for being demanding.

“As you say, Sir,” I say, pinching his nose. He grins.

“You won’t forget though. I will remind you every half an hour.”

“Now *you* are surprising me, Raiyan. Where did you hide this side of yours?” I tease him. In reply, he winks.

“Okay Now, you go back, have dinner, and sleep. I’m going inside,” I say, pushing him back. But he doesn’t move. And I know he won’t until I go inside. I wave him goodbye and leave him smiling behind me.

As I close the front door, I find my father in the living room, sitting on the couch, reading the newspaper.

He glances up seeing me in the doorway. “Something came for you in the mail,” he motions at the envelope on the coffee table.

Picking it up, I find it’s a letter from Kallaynpur Orphanage Home, and the envelope is open, which means my father has already read it.

R.I.P privacy.

I flip it open to see what this is about. Though I have an idea of what it could be. As I open the envelope a letter appears- the invitation letter, my guess was right. Each year in that orphanage, they organize a cultural event for the children. And this paper I’m holding is an invitation for me to join the event as I’m the sponsor of Forhad. I never missed a single event. I attended each one of them. I check the date of the event- *the day after tomorrow*. I fold the letter and slide it back inside the envelope.

“Is it about the boy you are sponsoring?” My father asks me though he knows the boy’s name. I have mentioned it several times, and he still calls Forhad *The boy* like he used to call Hussain *the boy*. The orphan children don’t bear a name for him.

“His name is Forhad. And yes, it’s from the orphanage.” I reply.

He seems to feel the edge on my voice, so he doesn't say anything further.

I head to my room.

My phone chimes after I shut the door behind me and throw the satchel on the bed. It's from Raiyan- the reminder. I smile looking at the text.

How was your movie night? Another text pops up on my screen, from Areeba.

I climb into my bed and lean my back against the headboard before replying. *We fell asleep.* I text back.

She immediately calls back. "You guys fell asleep? Seriously?" She sounds disappointed.

"Yep."

"Then? Nothing happened?" She asks.

I cleared my throat before speaking, "We kissed."

"Whaaaaat? Really? You are kidding?" She sounds so excited that if she was a balloon, she would have burst.

I laugh. "No, I'm not kidding."

"Turn the video on, let me see you, girl."

I switch on the video call on messenger. She is squealing as she accepts the request at once.

"Ellieeee. I'm so happy for you," she is literally jumping in the video.

I laugh looking at her. "Stop now, Arru."

"Tell me more. Did you guys make out?"

Areeba is older than me, but if anyone sees her now, they will count her as a fourteen years old teenager.

“Ellie, answer me and stop blushing,” she commands.

“We did, a little,” I reply, laying on my back on the bed. As the dupatta of my dress falls on my face, I can literally smell Raiyan. His perfume is all over my body.

“It was a great date, Areeba. I felt every second of it,” saying that, I smile.

Areeba smiles as well, “aww, that’s cute. And I’m proud of you this time that you weren’t dumb to mark today as *outing* as you did the last time.” She rolls her eyes.

“Hey! It was an *outing*. He didn’t ask me to go on a date that day.” I say, reminding her.

“Nor did he ask you today”. She has a point actually. Anyway, it doesn’t actually matter whether it was a date or not. We were together, we had an amazing time, that’s all which matters.

“Okay, I’m hanging up right now. I feel sleepy.” My eyes are literally shutting down.

“Okay, good night.” She ends the call.

I need to change into my pajamas but I don’t want to. I want to sleep smelling him. It’s a warm feeling which reminds me of today. Each time I’m with him since day one, it’s different, it’s satisfying, and it makes me more than happy. I pick my phone up and text him- *where have you been all my life, Raiyan Abdullah?*

His text comes a minute later- *I was waiting for you to appear in the window.* I laugh seeing his reply.

Yeah, that night in the window. He was smoking and I was so pissed at my life that I took it out on him. I still feel embarrassed remembering it now.

Thinking of him, my mind travels back to the notebook again. To the write up, to the date. I exhale a long breath. I need to trust him. I need to see what he does about the write-up. I can't let my mind wander around it and ruin all the good things that are happening.

Ellie, shut the thought out until January 10th. After that, you will ask him.

“Kallyanpur Orphanage Home?” Raiyan asks quizzically.

We have reached the orphanage and right now, standing in front of the gate. Kallyanpur Orphanage Home is a bit different from other orphanages in our country. It's not huge, rather it's relatively small but they are well-known for their service.

Today is the day of a cultural event, for which I was invited. I've brought Raiyan with me this time and he didn't know where we were heading until now. It was a surprise.

He looks at me, puzzled. I hold his hand, sliding my fingers through his, I say, “You'll meet someone special today.”

He frowns. “Who?”

“You'll see.”

We walk past the lawn then head to the backyard, where the event will take place. A stage has been set as usual and chairs have been placed in front of it, while an awning is hovering over our head. We take two front seats.

I scan the area until I spot Forhad. There he is, running towards me, smiling. I leap up to hug him as soon as he reaches me.

“How have you been?” I ask, rustling his hair.

He grins, “Good. You know, I’m going to act in a play today?” He says, swaying back and forth.

“I know. Jamil Bhai informed me earlier. I’m proud of you.” I turn to Raiyan. He seems clueless.

“Raiyan, this is Forhad,” I say pointing at Forhad.

As smart as Forhad is, he extends his hand to Raiyan, “I’m his brother.”

Raiyan takes his hand and shakes it, “Raiyan.” He seems more perplexed now. “You have a brother? And he lives here?” Raiyan asks, facing me.

I laugh, “I’ll explain later.”

But he looks both confused and displeased.

“Forhad, you wait here. I’ll be back in a minute,” saying that I nudge Raiyan to get in a corner away from here.

“Ellie, why does your brother live in the orphanage? He still has parents. He has you.” He sounds downright mad at the moment. And this is probably the first time I’m seeing him indignant and utterly exasperated.

I laugh looking at him. “Cool down Mr. Madman. He is not my real brother. And his parents died years ago. I’m his sponsor which I took when I was sixteen,” I explain.

Hearing me out, the frustration fades away from his eyes.

“I have seen Hussain’s life in the orphanage. Since then I wanted to do something to help orphan children. But I’m capable of sponsoring just one child, so it’s not much.” I say.

He eyes me for a moment, then exhales a deep breath and looks away. Probably, I should have told him about our visitation earlier, rather than keeping it as a surprise.

“Ellie apu,” I turn around, hearing Forhad behind me.

He is holding two coca-cola bottles in his hands. “Here for you and Raiyan Bhaia,” he says passing me the bottles. Raiyan smiles at him.

“We should go and sit,” I tell him, then I head to my chair and take my seat. Raiyan follows me behind. He is still quiet and it’s hard to tell from the look on his face whether he is still angry, sad or disappointed.

I turn to Forhad as he is sitting beside me. I take a book out of the bag which I bought for him a few days ago. I hand the book to him. His eyes grow wider, “Gift!”

I nod, “Yes.”

“Good Touch, Bad Touch by Habiba Hasin,” he reads the title out loud. Raiyan hears that too. He turns around to us.

“I want you to read the book thoroughly, it’s written in Bangla so you won’t face a problem reading it,” I explain to Forhad who has now flipped the cover page open.

“You’ve told me a lot of things about good touch and bad touch,” he says, “I know all of them now.”

“Still, you need to read it. Knowing the differences is important, Forhad. Besides, this book has stories inside, and you like to read stories right?”

He nods.

“So, read it,” I say again, firmly.

I wish I could have these books in my hand while I was his age. I wish someone would explain all about child molestation while I was a little girl.

But unfortunately, I didn't have any access to this type of book at that time.

Nor my parents were concerned about these issues. I don't want Forhad to face this brutality in an orphanage where such things happen a lot, because here, people regard the orphan children as helpless with no guardian to look after them. Actually not only here, it happens everywhere, and it doesn't actually matter to the predators whether children have guardians or not.

It's all the same to them- a little piece of a body who won't talk back because children aren't able to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behavior unless they are introduced to them with proper education beforehand. Even then, it's sometimes impossible to prevent all of them. But still, if a child knows what abuse looks and feels like, he/she will at least try to build a shield.

"I should get ready now," Forhad says, standing up, holding the book in his hand.

"Go, and break a leg today," I tell him.

He then runs to the building and disappears inside. I turn to Raiyan and he is eyeing me so intently like he is reading a book.

"What?" I ask him.

"Nothing." He shakes his head and then moves his gaze back to the stage again.

I sigh, thinking, what have I done that made him so pissed? But I'll ask him later, on the way home. Right now, my only focus is Forhad.

We say goodbye to Forhad when the event ends.

"Let's go there, the place in HatirJheel," Raiyan says suddenly.

The whole time on the way, we didn't talk until we finally reached the place.

Tonight also, this place is quiet and crowd-free. I guess people still don't know about this place by the lake. We climb out from the bike. He locks it and then starts walking to the shore. I follow him. We both are standing right now facing the water. There is nothing between us but silence.

My mind is still whirring about Raiyan's being upset.

I clear my throat before speaking up, "Sorry, I should have probably informed you about the orphanage tour beforehand."

Hearing me, his eyes get narrowed. "What are you talking about, Ellie?"

I wave at him, "You are mad at me right?"

A word was about to form between his lips but he retreats immediately and chuckles. "No, Ellie! I'm not mad at you. I'm sorry if I have made you feel like that." He pauses for a moment, then looks at me, his gaze soft and a smile appears on his lips, "Ellie, the orphanage thing- I was quite taken aback. That's it."

"Ellie", he says again, facing me now, "You are really a good human being, do you know that?"

I laugh. Then crossing my arms over my chest I say, "Why? Because I'm sponsoring Forhad? I'm sponsoring just one child. There are a whole lot of them who need help."

His stare lingers than usual, "We all have crossed people in our life who were in misery. But the thing you are doing, not many of us do it." He pauses before speaking again, "We see people in pain, we sympathize with them by talking, hearing their stories, giving out some money probably and

that's it. We don't take action. And here, you are, taking action. You just don't pay for him, you are actively involved in Forhad's life. So don't say that it's not much. It's a lot."

I smile at him. "Thanks."

"Let's sit over there," I say, motioning at the place where we sat that night. We then walk over there and sit side by side.

"Do you know, Raiyan, why did I give Forhad that book today?"

He nods. "Because you want to protect him."

"Yes. I do." I say.

While my gaze is fixed on the rippling lake water, my mind goes back to the sunflower field, to that jungle.

"Because little Ellie is still there alone on the rocking boat, in the sunflower field, in a bathroom, on a terrace, in a carnival. And she will never get out of there unscathed. Because boys like Hussain will never forget that the world is not safe even if he is part of the male population, not female. Because a predator is always a predator. They don't differ among genders, age, race, in fact, anything. All they can see is a body and nothing else."

"What happened to you Ellie?" Raiyan asks, looking at me. I turn my gaze to him, his jaw clenched, the sadness is back again all over his face, and the blue vein in his throat is throbbing rapidly. An unspoken horror is settling in his eyes. Perhaps, he's got a hunch of – what happened to me.

I smile almost half-hearted. I don't know why I have just smiled now. My nightmares are anything but worthy of even an impish smirk. I, then move my gaze back again at the lake water, I can see the reflection of the moon there. The whole ambience of this place is quiet and so soothing in the moonlight right now that even my horrors are terrified of its beauty.

“I was raped, Raiyan. I was only nine when it happened.” There it is. My life-long nightmares are explained in two sentences.

The atmosphere falls more silent than it was already a moment ago. And the silence is piercing. I look at Raiyan, he looks like all the air has been sucked out from his lungs. His face is plain white and probably he has forgotten to breathe. There is so much pain in his eyes right now that it’s able to drown me completely. I try to force a smile, but I epically fail to do so. Rather, I touch his arm softly.

“I’m so sorry Ellie,” he whispers, his voice cracks saying that.

I nod slowly. “Don’t be. Not your fault.” As I say that, he looks away to the other side. I see a gleaming teardrop rolling down his cheek.

I place my hand on his back firmly. He inhales a long deep breath. We both forget to talk.

Whereas my mind is trying its absolute best to stay focused in the present, it still somehow sways back to that sunflower field, to that little Ellie, who was running for her life, looking skyward, searching for God.

Did I find God that day? Did God miraculously appear before me on that fateful afternoon? The answer is both. He did and he didn’t. No, I couldn’t save myself from that man’s wrath. He managed to leave a wound, sealed for life in my soul from which I never got over. At that moment, I couldn’t find God. But God appeared right after it. Because I was not the same Ellie. That day in that field, shifted the whole course of my life.

“After that moment, when that beast got done with me, I just remember myself shutting the whole world out for a long time. And when I finally picked myself up, got out in the world- I never allowed any man, any woman to lay a finger on me without my permission. The scar is still there. I still bleed. But from the old wound, not a new one,” I say. “Later in my

life, whenever someone tried to do things even roughly nearly like that, I hadn't spared them. I didn't stop until they bled out."

"Who did it?" Raiyan asks, almost in a whisper.

But I'm not ready to tell him about *him*. Probably another day. "I will tell you, Raiyan. But today I can't."

He nods, in understanding.

"Have you ever told your parents?" He asks me.

"Yes, but not about the rape. I told my mother about other things that person did to me. I didn't have the strength to say the whole truth. Mom then told Baba about it, who did absolutely nothing," my face twitches up saying that, it reminds me- how cowardice my father was. "There is no use in telling my father about the whole incident. Do you know what he said when my mom told him about the molestation?"

I then turn my gaze to Raiyan, I guess he has already conjectured what baba's reply was, because he looks more saddened than he already was.

"He said, *boys will be boys*. And for years, I couldn't get the meaning of it. Finally, when I came to an age, an age of understanding adult things, I realized what he meant. And, that broke me again. That broke all the trust and respect a child can hold on her father."

Hearing me, Raiyan pulls me closer to him. I rest my head on his shoulder quietly. He then presses a kiss on the side of my forehead. "You don't have to say anything more *now* about that day Ellie. But remember, you can talk to me about it. Doesn't matter how difficult it is for me to absorb that you went through absolute hell, I'm all ears to you." He says strengthening his grip over me.

I know, in this man I can confide. I know, this man here is able to feel the raging storm inside me. I also know, from this moment right here, that

this man has become the person I was looking for all my life. My companion. With whom I can ride high and low, can swim back and forth, and even can become stagnant without giving a damn about life.

The Sky Is Dark

It'd been two weeks since Doggo was gone. And I had two weeks left in my hand before leaving my other best friend.

I made a plan: Hussain would leave the orphanage. I would give him our new address and phone number. I would never leave him alone in that cruel orphanage. I had already talked about this plan with him. He agreed. Though he was scared in the beginning, thinking about surviving on the street.

"You'll be fine. They don't treat you well." I told Hussain.

He nodded.

"I have some money in my piggy bank. You're gonna take it with you."

"No, Ellie. I don't like to take money from people."

I frowned. "You are so dumb. People need money to buy things. You must take the money. You can pay me back when you get older. Okay?"

"Okay." He said.

"And I have another thing for you."

"What," he asked.

I ran into the house and returned with a silver pendant. Mom bought three. One for her, one for me, and another one she'd got free. It had an Arabic verse written on it.

"Here, it's for you. Wear it." I passed him the pendant.

"What's written here?" He asked, taking the pendant from my hand.

*"It's an Arabic verse—He is with you wherever you are. Mom said it's a nice and powerful verse. He means **God** here. I wear it. You should also wear it. I'm sure if your mother was alive, she would have given you something like this."*

"Your mom is a wonderful lady." He said, then wore the pendant.

"When am I gonna leave the orphanage?"

"The day we are going to move."

December 2018

Today is 31st December. I'm doing some last-minute packing while aunt Rubina is sitting on the armchair in my room (yeah I know, shocking!). Alif and Ishita didn't have to talk to Baba to convince him about going to their country house. Surprisingly, Aunt Rubina came to the rescue. She has been very polite and considerate to me for a few weeks now

When I told Baba that I want to spend the 31st and New Year with Alif and Ishita in their country house, he did nag, but—Taaa daaa, Aunt Rubina appeared in the study where the conversation had been taking place.

"This girl is going through a lot. She deserves to go with her friends," she said, leaving me speechless for a good twenty seconds. I even forgot to blink. I bet even Baba got stunned by this sudden unexpected rescue.

“But she never went outside Dhaka alone before,” Baba said, mumbling.

“She is not going alone. Her friends will be there with her. I’ve seen those kids. They belong to a good family,” she argued back. Yeah, life surprises you in so many ways. Aunt Rubina is one of them.

Baba then agreed but asked me to leave him the address of their country house and save their phone numbers on his mobile. I did it without any rebellion. In fact, baba bought me a backpack yesterday for the trip. He stopped by my room, holding a shopping bag. Passing me the bag he said, “It’s for the trip.”

When I pulled that backpack out of the shopping bag, I was stunned. Maybe, overwhelmed too. Though I didn’t show that in front of Baba. This month of December is full of surprises I must say.

So, I’m here now and will leave within twenty minutes.

Their country house is in Sreemangal. Alif, Ishita, Raiyan and I— we’ll leave together in the same car.

“Did you pack your sweater?” Aunt Rubina asks as I zip up my backpack.

I nod. I took two of them as winter gets real in Sreemangal. It’s really chilled out there. Though, I’m not taking much with me as it’s only a three-day trip. Wrapping my red muffler around my neck, I pick up my backpack.

“Thanks for convincing Baba for the trip,” I tell Aunt Rubina. I didn’t thank her for that night.

She smiles and rises from the chair, placing her hand over my head she says, “Go. Enjoy with your friends. And call us once you reach there.”

I nod. “Of course.”

As baba has already left for the office, she walks me to the gate where Ishita and Alif are waiting in the car and Raiyan is waiting outside, leaning against the car door.

He straightens up immediately, seeing us. Aunt Rubina didn't know Raiyan is also going so I take a quick glance at her to read her expression. But she seems fine.

She recites some surah and dua and blows it over me. "Allah hafiz," she says as I'm about to climb inside the car. I turn around and give her a quick hug. Raiyan then takes the backpack from me and we both get inside.

"Where are your other friends? Aren't they coming?" I ask them as I'm settling myself. Including Shuvo, three more friends of theirs are going.

"You mean Tania?" Ishita says. She is looking at me through the rearview mirror, smirking. Throwing her a glare, I move my eyes to Raiyan beside me, who is busy placing things in the seat, he seems apathetic. But I know he heard it.

"I meant all of your friends. Where is Shuvo? Isn't he coming with us?" I say, in a slightly edged-up voice. At which Ishita laughs out, "Easy girl, I know. Shuvo will depart later in the afternoon. And the rest of them are coming in a different car."

That's good. I don't know whether I would feel comfortable having Tania in the same car in close proximity though we are going to spend two whole days together under the same roof. Raiyan asked me if I'm okay with it. I said it's more than fine. I know Tania seemed intimidating that night in the restaurant, but obviously, an ex of Raiyan is not going to eat me up.

"Did you take the motion sickness tablet with you?" Raiyan asks me.

I totally forgot to pack the meds with me. "No! I forgot."

"Don't worry. We will stop by a roadside pharmacy," he says.

“Shall we start?” Alif asks, drumming his fingers on the driving wheel. As we all nod, he starts the engine and our trip begins. I scoot closer to Raiyan and rest my head on his shoulder clasping our hands together. I catch Ishita smiling at us through the rearview mirror.

As the wheels of the car start rolling on the road, my excitement starts soaring. This trip, the thought of spending time with my friends and Raiyan, far away from the bustling city— these are more than enough to fill my heart. What else a person needs to be happy when she has her favorite people around with whom she can be her complete self?

“Ellie, we are here,” Raiyan nudges me softly as I fell asleep in the car.

We stopped by a roadside highway restaurant to have our lunch. After that, it was difficult for me to keep my eyes open.

I check the time on my wristwatch- 5:15 in the evening. It took us eight hours to reach here.

Rubbing my eyes with the back of my hands, I look out the window. We are now at the top end of a steep driveway with an age-old Stoney-walled two-storeyed bungalow on the right side, which is proudly sitting on top of a hillock. Getting out of the car, dropping my feet on the asphalt ground, as my eyes wander around, I get bowled by the haunting beauty of the place.

“Ishita, it’s beautiful!” I murmur under my breath.

The dark stone-walled bungalow, surrounded by tall green trees I don’t know the name of, misty air around and the cloudy winter sky upon us when the sun is setting in the west, it all suddenly feels surreal. I inhale the sweet cold air through a long breath.

Ishita holds my hand and drags me to the stairs of the house, “It’s gonna be the best holiday ever in your life.” She screams. I laugh out loud, seeing her excitement.

“You guys get inside, we’re coming,” Raiyan says, yelling from behind the car, him and Alif taking things out from the car trunk.

As we push open the front door, giggling, I halt back a step, discovering Tania sitting on the living room’s sofa all in her glory. She was reading something from a magazine.

With a red turtleneck sweater and black jeans, hair loosely curled down, and red lipstick gracing her lips, she really is looking like a model who has just come out of the makeover room. My hand immediately starts straightening my wrinkled white top. In my head, I’m trying to remember if I’m still wearing lipstick or not. And I’m sure the kohl from my eyes has got smudged out.

“There goes the devil, you okay?” Ishita says, smirking and tangling my arm with her arm.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I say, taking a long deep breath, having doubt over my reply.

Tania rushes to us. Well, not us, only Ishita.

“Hey!!! It’s so good to see you,” Tania says, throwing her hands around Ishita.

Catching Ishita rolling her eyes, I, somehow, manage to keep a straight face.

“When did you guys arrive,” Ishita asks, releasing herself from Tania’s hold.

“Not more than ten minutes ago,” Tania replies.

As her eyes fall on me, she smiles, “Hello.”

I smile back. I’ve no reason to hate her. But yet I feel a twinge in my stomach.

Ellie, she is just an ex. An ex, Raiyan would probably love until his last breath.

Well, that’s not helping.

Okay, Ellie, put your shit together.

“Hi. We’ve met earlier,” I say, gathering all the warmth I can, in my voice.

“Yes. That night in the restaurant. By the way, she talks about you a lot,” she says, gesturing at Ishita.

“I hope only good things,” I reply, pulling a million-watt smile on my face. God, it’s hard to fake a smile.

She laughs out. Is she faking also? Probably. It’s not easy to see your ex with his present. Wait, does she know that we are dating? I forgot to ask Ishita about that.

“Where is Zawad?” Ishita asks her, walking around the living room.

“In the bathroom. Taking shower. Where are your brother and Raiyan?”

“Here we are,” Alif says, out loud, letting the three of us know their presence. Raiyan locks the door behind him, stepping inside quietly. His eyes find me— standing beside Tania.

Walking forward, he passes me my backpack, “You forgot your backpack in the car.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, taking it from his hand.

“Good to see you Raiyan,” Tania says. this time, she doesn’t hug him.

So, she knows.

Her body language says it all. Her whole demeanor has stiffened, seeing Raiyan and me together in the same room. God! It *is* awkward.

Raiyan nods at her.

“Umm, I’m really tired. I guess I’ll take a nap after a shower,” I tell Raiyan. As tired as I am, I feel the need to flee from here before it gets more awkward.

“Sure. Are you feeling sick by the way?” He asks and hearing him I squint my eyes, why would I feel sick seeing his ex? That would be over-reacting.

“I meant the motion sickness,” Raiyan says, and it seems like he immediately catches the thought which was just running in my mind.

“Nah. I haven’t traveled this far lately. So just tired,” I say.

He nods, in understanding.

“Come with me, I’ll show you the room we are staying in,” Ishita says, wrapping her hand with mine, leading me to the staircase.

This whole bungalow has been made back in the British colonial period in Bangladesh. Ishita and Alif’s father got it as an inheritance from their grandparents. The interior has never been renovated into a modern-day style. From the furniture to the window sill, everything still looks ancient yet elegant. I like the fact that their parents kept it in its original form.

I was so excited that I’ll get to eat the delicious pitha, which their aunt makes in the morning breakfast. But they won’t be here this week. They left for Nepal two days ago, leaving the caretaker to look after the house and us. Actually, it’s better this way. Having older people around while hanging out with friends wouldn’t be as exciting as it will be now.

“God, how are you handling the tension,” Ishita says, as we step inside a nicely decorated bedroom.

“It’s okay. She seems nice.” I say scanning the room. The room comes with one twin bed and a single bed. Perfect. I will share the twin bed with Ishita. Tania can keep the whole single bed to herself.

She shrugs, “I don’t know. But I’m really sorry for putting you through this. She is our old friend, you know. So we can’t cut her off.”

“Now you are being ridiculous. Why would you guys cut her off? Raiyan and she dated for a while. Now they don’t. It’s actually simple. Nothing’s complicated,” as I’m saying this, I’ve really started thinking that it is not actually complicated. Yeah, the first wave of awkwardness was there downstairs, but it’s gone now.

Things happen. People date.

Shit happens. People break up.

They move on with other people.

“Better accept it as it is,” I tell her.

She rolls her eyes, “Probably.”

She then pulls out a blanket from the closet and throws it on the bed.

Spinning around she says, “Turn the water heater on. Take shower. And then you can take some rest.”

I smile, “Yeah fine. Now go.” I push her through the door and close it behind me. Checking the time and the darkness gathering outside I find it’s already 6 pm. I’m afraid I will catch a cold, showering this late on winter days. Besides motion sickness, I have an issue with catching colds easily. Throughout the winter either my tonsil grows or my throat sores. Sometimes, both.

After a long day on the road, traveling, when I'm standing under the shower, letting the warm water run through my body, my eyes fall shut automatically in comfort. Whoever has said that warm water cools down the nerve, said it right. It really does. I badly needed it.

I flip open my eyes as I feel complete darkness through the thin membrane of my eyes.

Light's out.

There is not a single ray of light coming from anywhere, from any crack in the washroom.

I turn off the shower and put on the dress as quickly as possible without drying the dripping water from my body.

I rush to the door and turn the knob. It doesn't open.

What's happening? Why doesn't it open?

I try again. It simply doesn't move.

The lock is jammed?

For god's sake, why on earth does it have to be jammed while I'm stuck in the dark bathroom. I feel my heartbeat fastening. This darkness is so piercing and blinding that this whole bathroom has run out of air.

I keep jarring, whirring, and punching the knob. But it remains the same.

Oh, God!

As I'm trying to breathe harder, the only thing that keeps hitting my mind is— *I can't faint.*

I won't faint. Not today. I can't let it ruin our trip because of me.

I drop to the floor and try to inhale as much air as possible. I enlarge my eyes to catch a glimpse of light.

I feel like a piece of shit who just keeps breaking down. Which other twenty-one-year-old is scared of things like darkness? I'm sure—no one. I'm the only one.

“Ellie! Are you alright?” I hear Raiyan's voice from the other side of the door. “Open the door.”

I jump up off the floor, and rush to the door, “I-I can't open it. It's jammed,” I say. “I'm scared. I can't bear darkness.”

“I know sweetie. Just stay calm, okay?” He says, his voice shaky. “I'm gonna bring you out.”

He then tries to spin the knob from his side. He tries in all the ways I was doing a while ago.

“Why is it not opening?” I hear Ishita talking.

“Raiyan, we should break the lock. It won't open. Everything in this house is age-old,” Alif's voice.

“First we should start the generator,” Raiyan says.

“Yeah, our caretaker has gone to the shed. The generator will be on within any time now.”

“What's the matter,” Tania's voice can be heard.

“Ellie is locked inside,” Ishita says.

God! Now she is here too. What she must be thinking about me, getting scared of the dark.

Some metal clankings can be heard from outside and some scratches around the door. Then after a few seconds, the door clicks open. And I find all of them standing before the door holding the mobile flashlights.

Some of them look tense and some of them look quizzical whereas Raiyan looks horrid. As I jump out of the bathroom, Raiyan pulls me in a

hug immediately. He rubs the back of my head to comfort me. Thrusting my face against his chest, I close my eyes and inhale his familiar smell.

“It’s okay, Ellie. You are okay.” He says, in a whisper, bringing his mouth closer to my ear.

I know, I’m okay now. I know nothing was lurking in the dark inside the bathroom except my own fear. I also know that this fear is never going to stop haunting me. I tighten my hold around Raiyan, just not ready to let him go yet.

The electricity comes back, or maybe the generator because the light gets on. I slowly release myself from his hold. Looking at my face, he still looks worried.

Ishita steps forward, “I’m so sorry, Ellie. Your first moment here has just got ruined.” She seems embarrassed whereas I should be embarrassed for freaking out.

“Don’t say sorry. I freaked out. Who does that anyway?” I say.

“Still,” she says, shaking her head. “I’m your friend. I should have known that you are scared of the dark,” she waves her hands in frustration, “I mean Raiyan knew. He ran upstairs as soon as the light’s gone.”

How did he know that I can’t stay in the darkness? I can’t remember if I ever told him that. I mean there are lots of things still left untold and this part of me, I never shared. I look at him, perplexed, but I don’t ask him right away while everyone is here. But I’ll definitely ask him later tonight. He is not supposed to know this piece of information about me.

“You look pale Ellie,” Ishita says, “Let’s go downstairs. I’ll make you some hot chocolate.”

I'm sitting on the counter stool now, watching Ishita mixing the cocoa powder in milk while everyone else is outside in the backyard, preparing for the bar-b-q.

"I just hate myself," I say, pressing my face against my palms, frustrated and embarrassed. "What is she thinking? That I'm a child who cries when the light goes out. Shame on me."

Ishita rolls her eyes. "Are you serious right now? You really give a two cents about—what Tania might think?"

I sigh. A sigh of another frustration. "You sometimes talk like Areeba. You are Areeba part two."

"We both love you. So when you talk shit, we remind you of that." She slides the hot chocolate mug to me over the counter.

I catch it just at the right time. Holding the mug with both palms of mine, I take a sip and let the warm, sweet, comfort drink send the warmth I need throughout my body.

"Better now?" Ishita asks, tilting her head.

"Much better," I reply. "Love you Ishu."

She smiles. I look at this girl and her smiley face reminds me of the night she came to me—distraught. Frustrated about her parents. That was the only time I saw her crying and distressed. She somehow manages to stay cheery and makes everyone around comfortable in her presence. It so easily comes to her: being friendly around everyone.

"How's everything at home? I mean your parents," I ask her.

At my question, her smile wipes away. She shifts her body on her other foot. Then exhaling a breath, she says, "Alif is probably not going. So, the money is available for me to use."

Okay. I don't know how to react to that. Alif doesn't want to go abroad for higher education, but the money is only available now for Ishita because he rejected the offer. Either way, it's pathetic.

I reach my hand to squeeze her hand. "I know what you are thinking. What do you want to do now?"

"I'm not taking the money. They can keep it. I would rather rot here than take money from them after this."

I smile at her. I'm really proud of her because she chose her self-respect over pity. "I'm sure you will manage something on your own."

She shrugs. "The excel sheet you prepared for me, it's excellent. So, let's see ___" our conversation cuts off by the ding of my mobile. I pick up to see an email notification has arrived.

I swipe up and unlock the phone. Clicking on the notification, it takes me to my email inbox directly, and my stomach makes a turn.

I straighten up in the chair. My eyes can't get any larger by seeing what I am seeing right now.

It's the acceptance letter from Andrea Hoffman. I scream.

"What happened?" Ishita jumps up.

I don't reply to her immediately. I'm unable to talk, actually. Rather, my eyes are fixed on the email—

Dear Ms. Eiliyah Ahmed,

This email is regarding the **acceptance** notice for your internship, for which you have applied four weeks ago in our prestigious internship program 2019-2020. Congratulations!

Kindly find the enclosed list of required documents and information we need you to submit within a week through email.

Sincerely Yours,

Laura Anderson

Officer, Student Affairs Department.

“It’s the acceptance letter from Andrea Hoffman!” I say finally.

Her jaws drop wide and big, then she screams. “Ellie! You got it!” she screams again and running around the counter, she jumps in to hug me. I hug her back—jumping and giggling like teenagers.

“How did it happen, Ishita?” I say.

We pull away. We are smiling like we have plastered a big grin all over our mouths.

“I knew it would happen. You would get in,” she says.

“Hey, I heard you guys screaming,” Raiyan says, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Then he notices that we both have gone red from the excitement. “Are you guys okay?” He asks, lifting his brow.

I run to him. “Raiyan, I’ve got the internship! They accepted me!”

His startled look shifts to rejoice now, “Whoa Ellie! That’s huge!”

I grin.

“I’m so proud of you,” he says, placing a kiss on my forehead.

“Let me go and tell Alif,” Ishita then runs through the kitchen door and heads to the backyard.

“This is the biggest moment in my life, Raiyan!” I squeal. “The only thing I truly ever wanted.”

Raiyan smiles. “I’m glad you made it, Ellie. You were always into photography!”

I shake my head. "It wouldn't happen if Alif and Ishita hadn't pushed me. I wasn't confident enough."

He nods. "I know. But don't underestimate your ability. Your photos are outstanding."

I smile. "You're too proud of me."

"Of course, I am."

I smile again. "I need to make a call to Areeba!" I say.

"Sure. Go and tell her."

First, I take a screenshot of the email and send it to Areeba.

She calls back immediately. As I receive her call, she screams through the phone, "Ellieeee!!! You made it! Girl, you don't know how proud of you I am."

I giggle, "I can't believe my eyes, Arru. How is it possible?"

"It is possible, dummy. *You* made it possible," saying that she cries over the phone.

"Arru..."

"Ellie. You are a girl to whom life's got as cruel as it can be. But look at you, you are something. Aren't you?" she is crying so hard, I remain quiet. I let her cry. The tear she is shedding, it's a sister's love, a friend's love. All these years, she stood by me like a rock. Sometimes like a mother, sometimes like a sister, sometimes like a best friend. No, she couldn't make the hurt go away, but she lessened the pain I was carrying by gripping my hand tight at each step so that I don't slip. She was the sunshine I needed to keep afloat through the life ocean during the storms.

"Arru..."

She is still crying, little hiccups are coming out of her chest.

“I love you Arru,” hearing me, she laughs in the middle of sobbing.

“I love you to the infinity you dummy!” she says.

I laugh. “Okay, now go wipe your face and let Aunt Trisha know about the news. Okay?”

“Okay. Bye baby sister.”

I chuckle, “Yeah, bye big one.”

Goodbye

*I*n this paper, I've written down our new address and my mom's phone number," I said, handing the note over to Hussain.

He glanced over it then gently tucked that inside his pocket.

"Here, take it." I passed him a shopping bag.

"What's in there?"

"Some clothes for you, money and...Mr. Dino."

"Mr. Dino? But he is your dinosaur."

"He is yours, from today. I have my mom. You are the one who is alone. You should have Mr. Dino."

He became quiet. His eyes had welled up with tears.

I stepped closer to him. "Hussain, don't cry, please. I'm really sad. I'm losing all of my best friends one by one."

"You are not losing me! I'll call you. We'll meet again." saying that, tears started rolling down his cheek.

I wrapped my hands around him. He broke into tears.

“Hussain, don’t be sad. From now on, you don’t have to think about nasty punishments, think about that.”

“From today, I won’t be able to talk to you either!”

“We will talk. I gave you my mom’s number. you will call me. then, one day we will see each other again.”

Holding him tight for a few more minutes, I release him. The time had come for him to leave.

“Take the path through the back street, as I said earlier. I’ll be here watching out for you. Okay?”

“Yeah.” He said yeah, but we were still holding each other’s hands. It hurts so much to say goodbye to your friend.

“Bye, Ellie.” He said.

“Bye. Take care of yourself and Mr. Dino. And beat anyone up whoever tries to hurt you.”

He laughed quietly.

Releasing my hand, he turned around and started walking to the backyard.

Rather than watching out for him, I kept watching him.

There he went, my best friend, he was only a few feet away from me and my heart already was hurting. I couldn’t wait to see him again, talk to him again, play with him again.

December 2018

It would be a shame if you call it backyard. It’s more than a backyard. It’s a stretched-out piece of land that ends in a beautiful tea garden. With the cold

wind biting in bones, the bonfire blazing in the middle of the yard, the smoky aroma from the bar-b-q, the bleary light dimming from the light post—the last night of the year can't be more magical than this. Alif is singing *country road* thrumming with guitar.

Dinner was delicious. Joy, their friend who did the bar-b-q is an expert I must say. We all are now seated, gathering around the bonfire, laid back, and waiting for the night to step in the New Year. Tania and Zawad are talking with each other. She looks annoyed for some reason. She was actually quiet the whole evening.

Whitney Houston's *I will always love you* is playing in the stereo to which Ishita and Shuvo are dancing. Shuvo arrived just before dinner.

It has been a crazy evening I must say. First, I got stuck in the washroom. Then the email came. Alif was jumping around like a kid hearing the news. I can't thank God enough to send me these two friends on my way when I was in need of it. I might have never applied if it wasn't for Ishita and Alif. They pushed me, they went with me to my photography sessions, and they made sure I applied. Thank God that I applied. There is no harm in trying, is there?

Raiyan stands up and reaches his hand out to me. "Dance with me," he says, smiling.

I laugh, "I'm a horrible dancer."

"So am I. Let's be horrible together," he says.

I laugh again and stand up holding his hand. Standing, face to face, He places his hand on my waist, I rest my arms around his neck and slowly we start swaying to the slow bit of the song.

"Have you ever slow danced before?" Raiyan asks.

"Yes."

He frowns, then smiles mischievously, “With Aryan?”

I chuckle, “No. with Areeba.”

He laughs, “Really?”

“Yeah, she was actually showing me how to couple dance.”

He then places his hand on my lower back and pulls me closer. “I envy her.”

“Why?”

“That your first dance was with her.” He then spins me around and thrusts my back against his front body. Resting his chin on my shoulder, his hands entangled with mine, we start grooving again.

“It all feels so surreal sometimes, doesn’t it?” he says. “Finding you, we became friends, we fell for each other. Now, this. This night dancing under the open sky without worrying about the world.” Saying that he kisses the side of my cheek.

I blush. “But it’s as real as it can be.”

He nods. “It is. Thank you for stepping into my life, Ellie. You make everything easier. You know that?” He whispers in my ear.

I spin around and take his hands to place them on my lower back. Resting my head against his chest, I say, “The moment you came into my life, you became the kindest human being I’ve ever met. So, it’s actually the other way around.” I look up at his eyes and smile.

Resting his forehead against mine, he takes my hand and slides his fingers through mine, holding it in the air, like a high five.

I look at our entwined hand, and it reminds me of Hussain. The first day, when I reached out my hand to shake his. He held it like this instead of shaking it. I sigh and move back my eyes again on Raiyan’s. His gaze is

calm and fixed on me. “I’m feeling cold. Can you bring my jacket from the house? I left it on the sofa in the living room,” he says.

“Sure.”

I head back inside the house. Getting inside, I spot his black jacket lying on the sofa as he said. I pick it up and a purple paper appears before me. I lean in and take the paper from the sofa.

You take my breath away every day Ellie. I laugh. So this is why he sent me here all of a sudden to get his jacket. I flip the paper and find another note- *Can you go upstairs in your room and open the closet, please?* So, you are playing a game huh? Okay. I’m on it.

I head upstairs and reach our bedroom. Opening the closet there, I find a bouquet of lilac roses lying before me and a note beside it. Sniffing the flowers, I pick up the note.

We were always meant to be together. I knew it the moment my eyes fell on you—brushing my fingers over his words, reading the line, again and again, makes me believe that this is the absolute truth. I flip the paper because I know there’s something written on the back of it. And I was right.

Can you please go to the terrace?

I laugh. Of course, I can. I take the bouquet and the notes with me and walk outside the room. The terrace is on the third floor. Pushing the door open, I step inside.

There has been a pathway created with an array of candles on both sides of the path from the door to the edge of the terrace where a small tent has been set. I take in the view with awe in my eyes.

I slowly walk to the tent and peep inside—a lamp is lit there and there is another note lying next to it. I crouch and crawl in, scooping the note, I read

it—*They say: I love you to the moon and back, you're the sun of my life, and so on. But I don't think you're any of that.* I frown. I turn the paper back and smile seeing what's written over there- *You're not the moon or stars. You're my whole damn sky, Ellie.*

“Ellie!” I look up from the note and find Raiyan ducking his head inside the tent.

I smile seeing him. Still quite taken aback by all these.

He drops beside me.

“So this is why you were feeling cold?” I tease him.

He laughs. “I wanted to make tonight special. Do you like it?”

I make a face that I didn't like. Then laugh out.

“What?” He asks.

I then hold his face with my hand and say, “It's magical, Raiyan.”

“I'm in love with you, Ellie,” he says suddenly, his voice soft and his eyes smiling.

I'm startled by this suddenness. I know he loves me. It's crystal clear from every move he takes for me, the way he looks at me but hearing it out loud from his mouth is... different.

I kiss him on his forehead, then on the tip of his nose.

“I've fallen for you too, and I can't get up. And I don't think I want to,” I say, slowly pulling back from him. I look straight into his eyes and say, “I love you too, Raiyan.”

Hearing me, his whole face lights up. He pulls me closer. We stay like that, holding hands—starry night, inside a tent, living the moment.

“It's been a crazy night, isn't it?” He says.

“It is.”

“How are you feeling now?” Raiyan asks.

I laugh, “Overwhelmed, excited. Actually, the word excited feels so underrated compared to the feeling I’m feeling right now.”

“I’m referring to earlier. The washroom,” he says.

I chuckle. What can I say? I *was* embarrassed and frightened.

“I’m a train wreck. ain’t I? Always on the verge of breaking down.” I say.

He frowns, “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am”.

Brushing his fingers on my cheek he says, “You are the strongest and bravest girl I’ve ever met.”

I sigh. “I wish it was true, Raiyan.”

“It is true. You are just not ready to admit it.”

I smirk. “How can I be the strongest and bravest one who is afraid of the dark?”

“Just because you are afraid of the dark, doesn’t mean you are not strong,” he says.

I smile. My gaze is fixed up at the sky. The sky is lit with Chinese lanterns. At least hundreds of them. This has been the New Year tradition for several years now.

“How do you know I’m scared of the dark Raiyan? I never told you,” I ask him.

He looks down at me and says, “Areeba mentioned it once.”

“Oh!” So, this is how he knows.

I take his hand into mine. Closing my eyes I say, “When I was little, Baba used to lock me in the dark bathroom hours after hours as a punishment...”

“Ellie, you don’t have to say that today,” Raiyan interrupts.

“No, let me speak.”

He hesitates then nods slowly.

“It was his favorite punishment. He never stopped until one day I fainted. I grew up but the fear didn’t stop following me,” I take a breath saying it.

He watches me quietly. “Parents are so cruel sometimes, aren’t they?” He says, his eyes now locked upward, at the sky.

“They are. As cruel as a person can be. My Baba was the harshest person around back then.” Telling him, I ask then, “How were your parents with you? I never asked you about your parents and your childhood. How was it?”

Hearing me, his whole demeanor shifts. He bites down on his lower lip and his jaw tightens. “Not good, Ellie,” he replies.

I turn my eyes from the sky at him, “We’re a part of the same ship then.” I stay quiet for a moment.

He once told me his father died. But we never talked about it afterward. I remember, saying that he looked sad and left abruptly. “How was your father with you? I’m sure he’s better than mine?” I ask.

Raiyan doesn’t answer my question. His eyes look empty. He opens his mouth to speak then shuts it again.

“What’s the matter? I’m sorry if I’ve you by reminding him. His memory must still hurt you,” I say, squeezing his palm firmly.

“What do you mean?”

“Your father. He died right?” I ask.

“My father is not dead Ellie,” he says.

I frown. He is not dead? Then why did he say he doesn’t have a father.

“Or he might be dead,” he says, “The thing is Ellie—I don’t know who my father is.”

I didn’t expect it—this answer here. What does he mean that he doesn’t know who his father is? I frown looking at him. He locks his gaze with mine. “My mother got pregnant with me when she was eighteen.”

He then exhales a deep sigh. “According to my grandma, she was depressed, lost, confused and was going out with several different guys at that time. So, she didn’t know which one of those guys she got pregnant with.”

Hearing what he has just said right now, I gasp. This boy here doesn’t know who his father is.

He never met his father. How do you react to something like that? Because I don’t know what to say. I just don’t have a clue. All his life he probably wandered around the fact that what a father’s love might feel like. This is why he is named after his maternal last name. This is the reason he doesn’t have a single photo with his father on Facebook.

I sit up and face him. His eyes are down. He is not talking.

“Raiyan!” I hold his face with both of my palms.

He looks up, smiling. “I’m okay, Ellie. My father’s identity hadn’t bothered me since my mother abandoned me.”

As if his not having a father around wasn’t shattering, now his mother?

“I had one parent left to look after me, to give me all the love a mother can give to her child. But she couldn’t. She didn’t. I guess you have already figured out that she is not involved in my life.”

No, I couldn’t figure it out. I thought he had some typical fight going on with his mom. I didn’t realize she was not involved.

How can a mother abandon her children? Mothers are different. I know because mine was. Everyone, I know around me, might have issues with their fathers but mothers?

“My grandma raised me. Because she gave up on me. She left me with my grandparents and went abroad. After several years, when she came back to take care of me, she abandoned me again in the middle because it was easy for her to leave her child than take in the shame from society,” he continues, leaving me astounded, “Remember, I told you once that I loved two women and one of them shattered me?”

I nod. Of course, I remember.

“It was her. I loved her but all she did was break me into pieces. I was talking to her over the phone, in the bookstore the first time you came in. She wanted to get back into my life. I forgave her, a long time ago. But allowing her again in my life? No!” He says, “Here I grew up without my mother’s love, father’s identity. But you know Ellie, I don’t grieve over these facts anymore because life has given me so much. Maybe not parents, but so many other things I’m grateful for. I got a roof over my head growing up, I received a good education, food to eat, and people like Nana Bhai and grandma to take care of me, I made friends. And now, you. I can’t ask for more from life.”

My eyes well up with tears. I can’t bear to look at him. So, I look away.

I inhale a deep breath. I can’t cry right now. Not in front of him. Now, at this moment, *I* need to be the strong one.

I pull him into my arms, rubbing the back of his head. The teardrop I was holding back, escapes my eyes. “I don’t know what to say Raiyan. I don’t know how to comfort you. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you earlier about my father. I should have,” he says.

Wiping my eyes, I pull away slowly. “Why *should have*?”

“You know...” he hesitates.

I chuckle. “No, I don’t know. If you are thinking that your parentage, your—not knowing who your father is, is gonna be a concerning matter in our relationship, then you don’t know me, Raiyan. Not yet,” I say. “My feelings for you are not gonna be any less knowing that you don’t know who your father is.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that,” he pauses, then says again, “I just thought I should have shared it with you earlier. Sorry.”

I sigh, thinking of him, how his whole life had been without knowing an important part of his identity. How it must have hurt him. How confusing it was for him to grow up this way.

This whole history of his life puts me to see him in a new light. He has turned out as a fine, decent young man despite having no parents around. It’s not fair to be mad at him right now. I look back at him again, softening my gaze.

“It’s okay,” I smile. I scoot closer to him, leaning my head on his shoulder.

Right here, tonight, Raiyan has shared a huge part of his life. Knowing about him more than before; knowing how difficult it was for him as a child is hurting me twice as much right now. Here, I was thinking I’m someone whose father used to torture his daughter badly. Now, look at this boy here, didn’t even have the fate to get a mother’s love.

The sky upon us suddenly blazes up with thousands of sparkling firecrackers. This means—the clock has turned to 12:00, and we have

stepped into the New Year.

“Happy new year, Ellie,” Raiyan says, tightening his arms around me.

“Happy new year, love.”

The Puzzle

One day, my mom's phone was ringing and I flew to her room to pick it up. She was cooking in the kitchen. Looking at the name on the phone screen, my heart plummeted. It was from Aunt Trisha.

It had been ten days since Hussain left and yet no phone calls came from him.

I checked my mom's phone a thousand times, but nothing. Mom got annoyed at one point.

"What's the matter? Why do you keep checking it again and again?" She scolded me.

She didn't know that I helped Hussain to run away.

Did something happen to him? Was he alright?— these were the thoughts that used to run over and over like a loop in my mind. I was so scared, sometimes I forgot to complete my homework.

I had been crying since the day he left. Each time my mom's phone rang, I used to jump up and run to check. I even called back to some unknown numbers, but they all were known to my mom, eventually.

I just prayed to God that he would call me. Probably he was busy sorting things out. Probably he hadn't got the chance to make a call. All I knew is that he would call me, maybe later.

January 2019

The last two days just flew by. One afternoon we were here, standing in front of this bungalow, and today another afternoon, we are leaving. I had the fun of my lifetime, I must say. We cooked our own food, we played board games and dumb charade where I epically failed. Raiyan rented a bike from the town and gave me a bike tour all over the place.

Whereas we all enjoyed ourselves to the fullest, Tania was very quiet and kind of lost.

“It’s because she is jealous of you guys,” Ishita said.

One thing I know is that Ishita and I annoyed the hell out of Tania at night. Because of our non-stop chatting in the room, she couldn’t sleep. At one point, she sat up on the bed and started watching TV series on her mobile.

Three cars are pulled up in the driveway. It’s time to leave. Ishita, Alif, and I are now waiting for others to come down.

“What time is it?” Ishita asks. My hand goes inside my pocket to take the phone out. It’s not there.

“Shit, I must have forgotten my mobile in the room. Wait, I’m coming back.”

I get inside and head back to the second floor. While passing the balcony, I pause and take a few steps back hearing Raiyan's voice. I take a few more steps back and spot him and Tania on the balcony, both are smoking. Raiyan looks upset and Tania's face is blazing. It's no doubt that she is super mad right now.

"You never loved me!" She snaps while Raiyan looks away. "I've been in love with you since the day we became friends. Since I was thirteen, Raiyan. And when we started our relationship, all you did was just neglect me, taking me for granted." Her face winces in bitterness.

I know I shouldn't be eavesdropping. But I can't move from my spot either.

"I said sorry a thousand times... for never loving you. I'm still sorry. But I never took you for granted, Tania. I ended our relationship the moment I was sure that we shouldn't be dating." Raiyan says. His voice sounds frustrated.

"I noticed the way you care for her, how well you treat her," Tania says. "You panicked the moment electricity was gone. Why did you never care for me? What was my fault? I did everything I could to make you happy." Her voice cracks while saying that. And suddenly I feel bad for her. There is nothing more sad and heartbreaking than not being loved by the person you love so much.

I see Raiyan standing like a statue.

"You said you love someone, and it's not possible for you to love me because your heart belongs to someone else. Now, how can you love *her*? How is it possible for you *now* while it was not possible in my case?" Ishita breaks into tears now. She is weeping.

If he had never loved Tania, there was someone else then. Someone nobody else knows about.

Then a fear lurks in my mind. If his heart belongs to someone else, if he loves someone else so much, to an extent that he broke up with Tania, who used to be his best friend then what are the chances for me? Where do I stand? We've only known each other for two months now.

"Tania, don't compare yourself with Ellie," Raiyan says.

Tania is still sobbing, "Why not? Because she is so great that I'm not even comparable to her?" She glares at Raiyan but Raiyan doesn't respond. As quiet as stone.

Tania laughs out. Wiping her face, she says, "Wow Raiyan! A girl came out of nowhere and you are blown away by her! Do you even know why am I dating Zawad?" She now looks straight right at him, whereas Raiyan's eyes are fixed on his feet.

"I'm dating him to make you jealous. You turned me into an evil, selfish person!" She wails.

Somehow, I knew the reason behind her dating a common friend. I guessed it. But her last statement annoys me. *We* choose what we would be, regardless of whatever unfortunate things happen to us. *We* decide it. *No one* else decides that for us. It's not right to blame someone else for turning out to be something we didn't want to be. Well, Tania, here, right now is not in her right mind state and I can't blame her either for the outburst.

"You shouldn't have done that Tania. He likes you. What was his fault?" Raiyan speaks now.

Tania's face twists in a smirk, "Oh come on, Raiyan. Don't you dare to patronize me. You made me do it!" She pauses before speaking again, "Just

answer one question. Honestly. Do you really love someone else? Or it was just an excuse to break up with me?"

Raiyan stays silent. He is not talking, not moving.

"Talk to me. Answer me. I, at least deserve honesty!"

Tell her Raiyan. I also want to know. Do you still love that person? If you do, I don't fit in the equation either.

Raiyan takes a long gaze at her before speaking. "I didn't lie to you. I would never do that to you."

So, Raiyan, you still love *her* and it hurts. I now know what exactly Tania's been going through. We are on the same page, friend. He would probably leave me as well. It's not possible to love two separate people at the same time with the same intensity. You can't love two different people the same without loving another one a little less. I know, I don't want to be the one who will have the *less* part of his love. I want it all or none. I have spent my life compromising with love. First, it started with Baba then Aryan. Now, not you too, Raiyan.

"What are you doing Raiyan? That girl will go through the same heartbreak as I went through once. You'll leave her eventually," She says.

"I won't...leave her."

Tania looks at him curiously. Me as well.

"She is the one I've always been in love with."

What!?

I feel my heart skipping a beat.

What has he just said?

Did I hear it wrong? I am the one?

Has he gone crazy or have *I* gone crazy that I have started hearing things wrong now? How do I fit in the picture? I had never met him before

this year's October. His words from that day on the rooftop start replaying in my mind- *that girl saved my life, Ellie. I owe my whole life to her.*

No, Raiyan, you don't owe me your life, because I never saved your life.

"You met her two months back, I guess? How come she is the one you always loved?" I hear Tania's stunned voice. She sounds as stunned as I am right now. It's like the day I found the notebook, the story written after me.

The story!

Which he wrote long before we met. Three years back.

A missing part of the puzzle has been matched now.

"Our first meeting didn't happen two months back, it was long before that. It's complicated. I can't explain it to you, Tania." Raiyan says.

Yes, it *is* complicated, Raiyan.

A lot more than *just* complicated.

It's actually *insane*.

Did I have an accident? Due to which I lost some memory and things like that?

How come we met and I can't remember it now?

How did he know me whereas I had never known him?

Has he been stalking me?

This is why he termed it 'meet'.

Is he a stalker?

A crazy lover we see in the movies and read in the books?

Or have I gone crazy?

Even if we met earlier, why didn't he ever mention it? Why did he hide it?

Whatever it is. It's not normal. It can't be. You owe me a lot of explanations Raiyan Abdullah.

I feel like walking in the middle of the conversation, dragging him out, and starting to interrogate him. But I can't. He doesn't know I'm here, listening to them.

I need to talk to Areeba. I need to be sure that I didn't have an accident that erased my memory. I need to talk to her to be confirmed that I'm not crazy.

Going crazy is very much possible for me, given the incidents of my life.

People go crazy all the time when they lose someone they love, when they get dumped by their boyfriend, or when they have a horrible past like me.

It's possible.

Probably, I couldn't take the toll anymore.

Probably, suddenly, it was all too much for me to handle.

Or, probably, whatever I've just heard actually didn't happen at all. I'm imagining it in my mind.

Tania has turned around now and she will be out of the balcony any moment.

I move from there and straight get inside the room to grab my phone. I start dialing Areeba's number.

It's ringing.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

She doesn't pick up.

I dial again. It rings again.

And again, she doesn't pick up.

I hover over to the messenger and shoot her a text- *call me ASAP! It's URGENT.*

“You took forever to bring your phone, Ellie,” Ishita says as I get out of the house. “What’s wrong with you? You look tense,” she frowns looking at me.

My mind and my brain are tangled right now. I know I don’t look okay. Yet I say, “Nothing,” and climb inside the car.

Raiyan hops in beside me.

Raiyan smiles at me and pulls my hands into his. I don’t smile back. I don’t even look at him.

“Hey, you okay?” He asks.

“Yes,” as I speak, I guess he feels the edge of my tone because his hold over my hand loosens.

As the car starts rolling, I move my gaze out of the window, back into the tea garden and the bungalow we are leaving behind. A perfect holiday ended in the biggest puzzle of my life.

The clock just stepped at seven in the evening when we reached home.

The whole journey, I talked as little as possible. My silence was louder than a crowd in a concert. Raiyan asked me several times what happened. But as baffled as I was, I said nothing. I excused myself, saying I was having a migraine

“Are you guys having a fight?” Alif asked at some point. I ignored. Because we are not having a fight. I don’t know what the fuck it is.

I jumped out of the car as soon as the car stopped in front of our gate. I come around the car and swing open Raiyan’s side of the door. He steps out. I say goodnight to Ishita and Alif and then grabbing Raiyans’s arm, I pull him to their gate, “I need to talk to you.”

The Lost One

January 2019

“What happened Ellie?” Raiyan asks. We are now on their rooftop, standing, facing each other.

I inhale a deep breath then say, “I heard the conversation you were having with Ishita today, on the balcony.”

Hearing me, it looks like someone has just punched out all the air from his chest. The blood rushes down his face. He looks scared.

I take two steps forward and then say, “I have a list of questions for you, Raiyan. And you better, answer me.”

He doesn’t move. He doesn’t blink. I can say, whatever it is he is hiding, it’s not good. Actually far away from good.

“How do you know me Raiyan? When and how did we meet before this October?” I ask, and my eyes are fixed on him. He looks away.

“How can you love me all your life before even meeting me? I never saved your life for God’s sake!” my voice gets as high as it can but I don’t

care. I don't fucking care.

"You did save my life, Ellie!" He whispers.

I frown looking at him. "I did? And I can't remember that I did? What am I now? Crazy?" I say, throwing my hands in the air.

He stays silent. As silent as stone.

"Answer me Raiyan!" I yell.

He looks up at the sky and bites his lower lip. "I can't. I can't right now".

"Why can't you?"

"Because you will hate me if I do."

I laugh out. He is concerned that I would hate him? He doesn't have any freaking idea that I despise him for hiding things I should know. "So, you won't tell me?"

He is quiet again. Looking at him, gauging him, I know he won't open his mouth.

"Okay." I turn around and head to the door.

"Ellie, wait!" He calls me from behind.

I turn around slowly.

He walks to me a few steps. "I'll tell you. Give me some time. I need some time."

I chuckle, "You had all the time in the world Raiyan."

"I know, I know. But I was terrified and scared that I would lose you again," he says, his voice moist and heavy.

"Again?" I repeat after him. "Why again? What happened earlier? — are the things I want to know."

"I promise Ellie. I will tell you," he says firmly.

I then turn around and leave without saying another word. It's been the most confusing day of my life. So confusing that I'm questioning my sanity. I need to stay far away from the person who created all the confusion. Who has probably hidden something so big that he is hesitating now to confess it?

"Hey, what's up? Everything's okay?" Areeba says, picking up the phone. I dialled her number as soon as I got back to my room. She sounds worried.

"Nothing's okay Arru," I say, pacing the room.

"You sound restless. What happened?" She asks.

I inhale a deep breath then speak, because whatever I'm going to talk about, it may sound insane.

"First listen to me carefully."

"Okay".

"Did I have an accident recently? Or three years back? Or ever in my lifetime?" I blurt it out.

"What kind of accident? Your hand burned once, while you were taking out the pizza pan from the oven," she replies.

"Not that. I meant, car accident, train accident or maybe bus? You know where people lose their memory?"

"You mean where people collide against the tree and forget what their name is—type of shit?" She laughs.

"Yeah, kind of".

“Have you gone crazy?”

“I’m trying to figure *that* out. Why can’t you just answer my question?”

“Well, Ellie, you *are* crazy. I mean yeah, sometimes. But no, you never had that type of accident where you lost your mind or memory.”

I exhale a sigh of relief. Placing my hand on my chest, I sit down on the bed. I didn’t lose my memory. It’s intact.

“Are you there Ellie? You’re kind of creeping me out,” Areeba says, sounding puzzled.

“I’m here.”

“So, this is your urgency? Checking out the fact whether you had ever lost your memory?”

“Yes. Actually I need to tell you something. Something happened back there,” I say.

“I presumed it,” she says. “But you told me it was the best holiday vacation ever. What happened that made you question your sanity?”

I then start telling everything. Each and every syllable and word of Raiyan’s and Tania’s conversation. I tell her about the notebook thing, the story, and the date. I tell her about the fight we just had.

“Now tell me. Help me to understand what is it? How do I fit in the picture? I feel like a big piece of a puzzle which has been missing.”

I hear Areeba sigh before speaking up, “Okay, let’s get into it,” she says. “First thing first- you never met Raiyan before this October. I know, because if you had, at least I would have known.”

“Yeah.”

“So, that clears out this thing- you never saved his life as he said it. Which doesn’t make you the person he loved.”

“I know.”

“Well. Now, *suppose*, he had met you before. Probably he had seen you somewhere, he built a crush on you, he fell in love with you, wrote a story about you- all of these happened, without *you knowing* any part of it. It happens, it’s very normal. It doesn’t label him as a crazy lover,” saying these, she pauses for a moment. “Falling in love with you might have given him some kind of hope, a zeal to live life happily as his past history is not even nearly comforting. Probably, this is how you saved his life without doing it figuratively. So, when you guys finally met, co-incidentally this October, he held onto you. He reached out to you. You guys became friends, then a couple.”

Hearing her out, it seems possible. Very much possible. But, there is a but. “I get it,” I say, “What you are suggesting, I get it. But there are so many- probablys, maybes and might bes Arru.”

She sighs, “I know. But to clear your doubts out, he needs to speak out which he will, he told you. Till then wait.”

She is right. Losing sleep over this, I’m not going to reach an end. I need to wait for him for the answers. Then a question clicks my mind. “Arru, have you ever told Raiyan that I’m afraid of the dark?” I ask her.

“No. I don’t know. Why?”

“He said, you told him about it.”

“Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. Whatever the confusions are, Ellie, it will go away once he lets it all out. And listen...”

“What?”

“You are not crazy, okay? You are the strongest girl ever. You fought through life and never gave up. That horrible incident couldn’t knock you off and trust me, nothing ever will. You are that much stronger,” she says firmly.

I chuckle, “This is the second time in the last two days someone said I’m the strongest girl.”

“Who was the first one?”

Exhaling a deep sigh, I reply, “Raiyan.”

The Father, The Wolf And The Broken Girl

January 2019

“I’ve cooked your favorite biryani today,” Aunt Rubina says.

I woke up late today. After throwing my mind up and down, left to right, I was finally asleep after four in the morning. When I woke up, it’s already lunch time.

“You cooked kacchi?” I ask her. The whole house is heavy with lamb and the spicy fragrance of Basmati rice.

“Yes.”

“She asked me to buy the meat from a special store,” Baba says, motioning at Aunt Rubina, “Their meat is premium quality.”

“But kacchi is not my favorite,” I say and Aunt Rubina’s face wanes a bit. “Anyway, thank you,” I don’t want to hurt her feelings. At least she tried to be nice.

Half-smiling, Aunt Rubina then takes my plate and serves me a big spoon of biryani.

“How was your trip?” Baba asks me, chewing the potato.

“Great! We arranged a bar-b-q and bonfire,” I reply.

“Sounds nice. How is the weather over there?”

“It was really cold and even rained once.”

“It always rains over there. Even in winter.”

“Seems like that,” I say. “How was your new year?”

Baba laughs out. “We are old people now. It’s either every day a new year for me or the same old one.”

“For us, there is no new year. No 31st,” says Aunt Rubina. “Once you get old, life becomes all about children, medicines, doctors, and TV.”

I smile at her, “Yet you can enjoy it. In your own way. You can start reading all the books you piled up over the years. Or you can start a new hobby like painting, writing or photography.”

“Ahh, talking of photography, I forgot to tell you, Ellie, an email came for you from some Andrea photography centre.” As Baba mentions it, I know what exactly he is referring to. The acceptance letter was supposed to come in mail form as well.

I keep eating silently because I haven’t told Baba yet about it.

“What is the mail about?” There, he asks.

I’m confused right now, about whether I will tell him now. With so much going on in my life, if I tell him about the photography internship, I don’t know how I would handle his reaction. But I should tell him. Hiding things doesn’t bring any good.

“I need to talk to you about something,” I say, looking at him.

“About the mail?” He asks.

“Yeah.”

He nods, “Okay. I too, in fact, have something to tell you.” At this point, Aunt Rubina stops eating. She eyes Baba once then again goes back to chewing food.

“Sure.” What does he want to talk about?

The rest of the lunch, we remain quiet. I am quiet anticipating the moment to come- Baba’s reaction to my photography internship.

Why Baba and Aunt Rubina fell quiet, I have no clue. It was going like a hearty and warm lunch and suddenly it is not.

After having food, Baba stands up and says, “You go to your room, I’m coming.”

I’m sitting on my bed waiting for Baba to flash my big news. Whatever his reaction will be, I’ll handle that. I’m not little anymore. And certainly, he is not going to slap me or anything like that. He stopped doing these things a long time ago. But, those fearful moments from my childhood still keep lurking in my mind.

“Ellie!” Baba steps inside the room, pushing the door.

I stand up automatically when I see him. He enters and shuts the door behind him. The look on his face seems serious. What is it that he wants to talk with me about? I’m really worried right now because if he is concerned about something beforehand, then he would not take my internship thing positively.

He slowly walks to the armchair beside my bed and takes a seat. I sit down as well.

“Baba, I got accepted into an internship program,” before the atmosphere gets more serious I tell him. No more dilly dally. No more anticipation.

Hearing me, he frowns, “What kind of internship program?”

I take a quick breath then say, “You know, I have a thing for photography?”

He nods.

“Well,” I continue, “There is this famous photographer- Andrea Hoffman who offers a fully funded yearlong internship program. I applied there a few weeks ago and I got accepted.”

Baba was listening to me intently. After I’m done breaking the news, he falls silent. He is not saying anything. I’m also not talking, rather I’m watching his body and facial movements.

He rests his arms on the lap of him and his eyes go out of the window, outside. He is thinking about something. Then he moves his eyes from outside at me and says, “Congratulations Ellie!”

Well, I’m kind of poleaxed now. Did I hear Congratulations? I eye him more adroitly. No, he is not looking disappointed or mad. He looks somewhat normal; anxious about something but normal from the news I just broke.

Surprising me more he asks, “When will it start? The internship?”

“March, this year,” I reply.

“Then what about your university? Are you taking a break?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I’ll attend online classes for the semesters left as I need to be in the Netherlands this year.”

“So, the photography school is in the Netherlands?” He asks.

I nod. Would he oppose now knowing that I'll be away to a different country alone?

Everything falls quiet again. If a pin drops now, the sound will be heard. I see a bee buzzing outside my window. His buzzing sounds more alive than the two of us.

"Ellie," Baba speaks, clearing his throat and muffling the bee's buzzing, "Let me know if you need anything okay?"

Whoa! I hit a jackpot today! Baba is asking me to reach out for his help regarding my internship tour? Either he has gone saint or this is a parallel universe where I'm blessed with a supportive father.

"Thanks, Baba," I say, stunned. He smiles.

"You wanted to tell me something?" I ask. His serious look, fidgeting his legs continuously tells that he is the one who is nervous today.

"Yes. Ellie." He says. His eyes downward, "Whatever I'm going to say, try to understand it with an open mind okay?"

I frown. Baba's giving introductory notes before coming to the main point, only suggesting one thing- whatever he is going to say it's not pleasant for me. What can it be? Is he going to remarry? Because if this is the case, then he doesn't know that I really care less whether he remarries or not.

"I wanted to tell you that..." whatever he was trying to say, it cuts off in the middle as the door of my room swings open.

Layla peeps in. All the maids around this house are kind of invisible. They appear on the dining table and when a guest comes. The rest of the day they do their chores quietly.

"Sir, Rubina madam is calling you. Her son came."

I was in a stunned yet joyous mood, but all my joy, my smile, and the relief that Baba didn't oppose, fizzles out as the air goes out of a balloon hearing what Layla has just said—*her son came*.

Her son! Nirjhor Bhai! The man I trusted so much! The brother I loved! The pervert who rocked the boat! The wolf who chased me down in that sunflower field!

My mom barred him from ever coming near me again. After that, I didn't see him for years. What is he doing here now? How dare he be under the same roof as me? Who gave him permission to set a foot inside this house?

I look at my father and his eyes look as terrified as the eyes of a scared deer who just jumped in front of a lion.

He is terrified of me.

“What is he doing here Baba?” I look straight into my father's eyes. And his hesitant demeanor says it all. This is why today's lunch was special; Aunt Rubina actually cooked her son's favorite food, not mine.

This is why Baba didn't oppose hearing my internship news. This is the reason Aunt Rubina nowadays has eased up with me, and supported me for my Sylhet tour. The person she used to talk to over the phone, it's him.

So, everything was a part of an act. Had a purpose. A lie. A fake showing of love. An excuse to validate this moment. So that, her son can come here and meet her.

“Ellie,” Baba speaks out. “He came back from Malaysia last week. He wanted to see his mother. They haven't seen each other in a very long time. Your aunt really wanted to meet him, to cook for her son. He is ultimately *her son*.”

“And I’m your daughter Baba,” I say desperately to state the fact he probably has forgotten.

I feel so disgusted with myself. How did I have the audacity to believe that my father has changed? How come I believed that, he now understands me even for a little bit. Whereas the truth is he never did. He never will.

“It happened a long time ago, Ellie. Why are you still holding onto it? He was young at that time. Made a mistake,” while Baba is saying these, the moment from my childhood resurfaces in my mind. The moment when my mom told Baba about the molestation. That night too, he uttered the same speech—*He is young. Made a mistake. Men will be men.*

“Men will be men, won’t they Baba?” I say.

“What?” He looks puzzled. Can’t recall his own saying.

I laugh quietly, “*Men will be men*— you said it when mom told you about Nirjhor Bhai.”

His face hardens. And my heart breaks again just like it broke that day after hearing my parent’s conversation.

My heart breaks because a father has allowed the abuser of his daughter in the same house.

My heart breaks because my father couldn’t be a father after all these years.

My heart breaks because Baba’s heart doesn’t even crack thinking of what his little girl went through.

I stand up.

Before I break down, and lose my mind; I need to leave. I need to be somewhere far away from this house. From my father. From the people I

thought have finally started to love me.

I rush to the closet and grab my bag. Throwing my phone inside, I head to the door.

“Ellie, where are you going?” Baba asks, standing up from the chair.

I’m stunned by his question. Did he really expect me to stay in the same house where Nirjhor is right now?

I turn around from the door and face him, “I thought you had changed.” I say as calmly as possible, “I thought you finally felt your daughter’s pain. What I didn’t know was that it was all a part of an act.”

“You’re wrong. We were not acting Ellie,” while he says that I laugh again.

“Seriously? I’m wrong?” I close my eyes inhaling a long breath. “That night when you told my mom that whatever Nirjhor did was a mistake, I knew from that moment—you’ll never be there to protect me, to stand up for me. At that moment, I knew I could never trust a man.” I then take a few more steps forward, “You hurt me thousand times Baba. You took Doggo away from me. You used to hate Hussain. Your heart never trembled to lock your little girl inside a dark bathroom. Your hand never stopped beating me inhumanely. You did everything to insult me every now and then. After all these, I still tried to believe in you until that day. That day, when you refused to condemn the fact that your nephew wronged me, hurt your daughter. I knew you can never be a father. It’s just not in you.” I look away, my eyes are welling up with tears and Baba is standing dumbfounded. “All this time I used to think I lost you. I lost my father. But do you know the truth, Baba?” I say looking at him again, “You are the one who lost a daughter. I never lost a father. Because I never had a father.”

I take a long deep breath. “He raped me baba. A truth I never told you.”
All the colour rushes down his face hearing what I have just said.

I told him today not because I want him to sympathize with me. Not because I want him to kick Nirjhor off the house. I told him because I want him to live the rest of his life with it. Because after today, I’m never coming back to live with him.

Leaving him at the door with this ugly truth, I head downstairs. I won’t stay in this house not for a single moment.

Walking down the stairs, I see that man, that wolf, sitting on the chair beside Aunt Rubina in the dining room. And all hell breaks loose. All my nightmares get alive right at this moment. All those sleepless terrifying nights start punching me on my face. Can people relive the most haunting moment of their life? Because I’m right now in that sunflower field. Running. Scared for life.

Did he just smile at me? I see Aunt Rubina standing up looking at me with horror in her eyes because my feet have started moving in his direction, where he is seated. My eyes only see him. Everything in the room has disappeared at this moment. Aunt Rubina, Layla in the kitchen door, the big chandelier over my head, this room—everything.

And then I jump on him. I spit on his face. I throw punches after punch at him. While a pair of hands try to pull me away, I shove it off. All I want to do is hurt this man. Punch this nasty piece of shit. Strangling him to his death.

I feel my hands go up around his neck gripping his throat tight. He tries to scream but fails. His tongue comes out, choking. Today is the day he dies.

“Ellie!” I hear Areeba whispering. I blacked out.

Looking around, I find myself on the living room couch wrapped in Areeba’s arms. I can’t remember when Areeba came and how I ended up here in the living room.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“Shhh, it’s okay Ellie,” she says, rubbing my shoulder. “He is gone.” She kisses me on my forehead.

I see my father sitting on the couch across us—his arms hanging from his shoulder. He looks tired, defeated. His eyes are bloodshot, his face swollen.

“Why you never told me before that Nirjhor did...” he doesn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he is looking at me like a father does. For the first time in my life, I see empathy in his eyes. An empathy I had been searching for, my entire life. But it really doesn’t matter to me anymore.

I feel exhausted. My brain feels numb. I close my eyes and say, “What would you do Baba if I told you earlier?”

“I would have ripped him off, Ellie. You are my daughter.”

I start laughing frantically. I’m laughing so hard my eyes get watery. Baba doesn’t look at me eye to eye. His eyes are set downward on his feet.

Areeba’s grip tightens around my arm.

I wipe the tear from my eyes and say, “So abusing your daughter was not enough right? It needed to be as big as rape?”

“No, no. Ellie,” he says, shaking his head. He then looks me into my eyes and tells me, “I’m so sorry Ellie. Forgive me.” Saying that Baba breaks into tears, “Forgive your baba, Ellie.”

He is weeping so hard his whole body is trembling. And I sit here like a petrified stone. I don’t move an inch. I never saw my father cry. Not even for once. I used to question often—does he have any emotion inside his heart?

“You broke my heart so many times Baba and each time *I* mended it. You never placed your hand over my head and said that you were sorry for all the horrible things you made me experience until today. So, to be worthy of your love and apology, I needed to be raped?” No, his weeping doesn’t melt my heart. It makes me scream at him, yell at him, stuffing him with all my buried wounds—from losing Doggo till now. He is not going to get forgiveness from me.

“You ruined my childhood just because you used to be angry all the time. Why Baba?”

“Ellie, calm down,” Areeba says, squeezing my hand to soothe me.

But I don’t need to get soothed now. I need to let it out. I need to flood this man sitting in front of me with all the things I kept carrying on my shoulder. My shoulder is burdened, my heart is heavy and I refuse to bear it any longer. Not until today. Today he pinned the last nail on the coffin by allowing that beast inside this house.

I get up from the couch and slowly walk to my father. Crouching down in front of him while he is still weeping, I look at him and say, “They say forgiveness frees your heart. It’s the greatest thing out there. But do you know Baba, what do I think?” Baba doesn’t reply. I know he won’t.

“Sometimes, the heart frees itself by not forgiving because some people don’t deserve forgiveness. And you are one of them.”

The Orphan Boy

Looking at the children playing in the park one day, I was thinking of Hussain. Months passed by, he didn't call me. I had been waiting for his call, but the call never came. Eventually, I told my mom about the day I helped him run away. She'd get tense too.

I often wondered, how could you be okay without talking to your only best friend? I knew I was not okay. I was far from being okay. I was upset and heartbroken, waiting for him.

I even learned how to pray salah so that I could make a prayer to God for him to call me.

"You can pray to God without even offering salah, Ellie," my mom told me when I asked her to teach me how to offer it.

"God is everywhere. He is not confined to the prayer mat or salah. You can call upon him even when you are walking. He is with you, wherever you are," my mom told me.

"But I want it to be the perfect mom. I miss Hussain," my eyes were teary, while I said that to my mom.

My mother eventually taught me how to offer salah. And a call from Hussain was all I wanted in my prayers to God. I started praying to him day and night, even when I was eating, walking or reading in my mind. But we don't know God's plan. We don't know how he works, so my prayers remained unanswered.

But one thing I knew by then—waiting is painful. A teacher of my school once said, “You can eventually get over a person who died. Because no one waits for the dead. But waiting for someone to return who is alive and lost, it's horrifying.”

I didn't understand half of the things she said that day. But as we grow older, we get to realize the flow of life. So did I.

“So, he never came back, Maa?” Sarah asks.

I smile. “He did and he didn't.”

She frowns, “I don't understand.”

Pinching her cheeks, I reply, “I will tell you later on. Some other day. We have a lot of things to do today.”

“Maa, you can't just leave the story in a cliffhanger,” she throws her hands in the air.

I laugh. “I'll tell you. But now is not the time.”

January 2019:

Seven days later.....

I've never seen the ocean before. I didn't have any idea that when you stand in front of this vastness, you feel as small as an ant.

I feel like an ant right now, because there is nothing except those huge waves crashing on the shore before me.

“I’m scared of the ocean, you know?” Areeba says. She is standing beside me. But she is not as enchanted as I’m by seeing this incredible creation of God.

We got off the bus, it’s only been three hours. After checking in to the hotel, throwing our backpacks in the room, we came directly to the beach.

I left my father’s house on that very night. Since then it’d been five days I was staying at Aunt Trisha’s place. I have a plan to stay there until I fly to the Netherlands in March.

I was on junks and sleeping. Sleep and junks. I didn’t even shower in the last two days. My hair looks like dried grass and I’ve a permanent eye bag under my eyes now.

I was all numb, stoic until last night. Then this morning, I decided to come here, to see the ocean I always wanted to see.

“Why are you scared of the ocean?” I ask her.

She shrugs, “Years ago, the first time when I saw it from the bus, and those big waves; somehow it baffled me.”

I laugh. “I didn’t know those big beautiful waves could be scary, Arru. Look, it’s so serene here.” I say, closing my eyes, silencing everything except the sound of waves and seagulls.

Areeba’s phone chimes, pulling me away from the trance.

“Umm...Ellie. Don’t get mad at me alright?” She says hesitantly.

From the tone of her voice, I know that she did something to get mad at. “What?”

“Raiyan’s here.”

I frown. I'm not mad but puzzled. "You told him we are coming here?"

She nods.

I sigh.

"What can I do?" She says, throwing her hands in the air. "He had been coming to our house every single day. He was worried for you. You weren't returning his texts and calls, Ellie. This is not fair to him."

"Not fair to him?" My brows get lifted, "He was hiding things from me Arru."

"He asked for time right? And he wanted to talk to you about it since then. But you were being so stubborn."

I don't argue back because whatever she is saying it's true. He had been pleading with me to meet, to talk. I didn't even reply him back.

"He is here," she says, elbowing me.

I turn around and see him walking towards us. As he approaches, I can now see him clearly. He looks like he is being sleep-deprived and lost a few pounds. There is something in his hand—a shopping bag.

"You guys talk. I'm heading to the hotel," saying that she starts walking back to the road, leaving us to ourselves.

Raiyan and I are watching each other like so many years have passed since we met. Yet he doesn't pull me in his arms, neither have I thrown myself into his.

He slowly walks to me then stops. "Can I hug you?" He asks.

I shake my head. "No."

He nods. "How are you now, Ellie?"

I don't answer him. Instead, I slowly turn around to face the sea and drop on the sand, pulling my knees to my chest. He sits beside me, keeping the shopping bag between us.

Both of our eyes are now set on the grey water of the Bay of Bengal.

"I'm better now," I speak up finally. "Far better than I was five days ago."

"I wish I was there with you!" He says in anguish.

"You can't be everywhere Raiyan. I need myself to put myself back together."

My eyes wander far away to a dime-sized boat floating on the mid-ocean.

"I'm going to start counseling, you know," I say. "I should have started it a long time ago."

"You are starting it, only that matters," he says.

I nod. An eagle flies over our head and its screeching pierces the air.

"It was my cousin Raiyan. Aunt Rubina's son Nirjhor, who did it."

"Him?" Says Raiyan.

"Yes. A man I loved, I trusted," I say exhaling a breath, "He used to adore me a lot. Whenever Baba beat me or punished me, he used to be the savior. So, I trusted him. I didn't realize what he had been doing with me until one day he raped me. Even then, I didn't understand it completely. I just knew he hurt me badly. A few years later, when I grew up a little, I got to realize—what had happened to me. Then, I told my mom."

"And your father allowed him under the same roof?" Raiyan asks.

I chuckle, "Yes he did. He said he wouldn't allow him if he knew he raped me. Abusing me wasn't enough." My face twitches up saying, "And

that fucker rapist? He smiled at me, seeing me standing on the stair step that day.”

Raiyan then reaches his hand to touch mine.

After a while he says, “I’m sorry Ellie,” his firmly squeezing my hand reminds me of all the moments between us. All those times he was with me even when he was not supposed to. “These people think they can do whatever to us and we’ll remain intact while they leave us broken, damaged. The damage we fight hard to heal.”

Hearing him, I shake my head, “We are not damaged or broken, Raiyan. We are wounded. It’s them—my father, Nirjhor, your mom; they are broken. Something inside them has been damaged so deeply that wherever they go, they spread it like a disease.”

Raiyan heaves a sigh. And we both get quiet. His hand is still on mine. I feel like getting closer to him, but I can’t. His secret, his unanswered questions are still there dangling between us.

“The ocean is beautiful in real life as well, isn’t it?” Raiyan says. His voice is as calm as the water. “This is my first time watching this beauty.”

“You travel a lot. You never saw the ocean?” I ask, perplexed.

“No,” he says, shaking his head

“Why? How can you travel a lot and never want to see the ocean? That’s atrocious.”

Returning his gaze from the water at mine, our eyes meet, “Because a long ago, someone promised me that she wanted to see the ocean with me. So, I had been waiting for the last fourteen years to see it together.”

I frown looking at him.

He smiles. "You wanted to know how we met before this October. Today I have all the answers for you." Saying that he then takes out a square cardboard box from the shopping bag; then a notebook. Looking closely I notice it's THE notebook. The same one where the puzzle started. But the date on the notebook was 10th January which is still two days away.

Handing me over the box and the notebook he says, "Unpack the box and read the notebook. All your answers are there."

He then stands up and starts dusting the sand off his pants.

"Where are you going?" I ask him.

"I'll be around. Let me know once you finish reading the notebook." He turns around and starts walking in the opposite direction.

I keep watching him walking until he becomes the size of a dot in my sight.

I then slowly pick up the box and open it. Slipping my hand inside, I take a dinosaur out of the box and I freeze.

It's a green wooly dinosaur with a red tongue. Mr. Dino! The same Mr. Dino I gave to Hussain when he was leaving. Where did Raiyan find him?

And just like that, all the missing pieces of the puzzle start to match.

His mentioning of seeing the ocean together which I promised to Hussain; the locket around his neck, which I gave to Hussain; his knowing of my fear of the dark, now I know Areeba never actually told him, he knew about it beforehand; his story written after me dated three years back; which I was thinking I never met him before this October, whereas we did meet, a long ago; we do know each other like heart and veins.

Everything he has ever said to me reverberates in my ears. It all now matches. *He* is the loose end that was missing. *He* was the missing piece which I never even imagined.

“Hussain?” Uttering the name, the long lost boy’s name under my breath, I refuse to believe it then again compelled to believe it. This is the only answer. Raiyan is Hussain. Hussain is Raiyan. The same person.

How could I never recognize him when he was just in front of me all the time? Well, how would I? He was nine when I last saw him, he is twenty-two now.

But they can’t be the same person, can they? Hussain was an orphan. Raiyan is not.

I then pick up the notebook and open it. It’s the same write-up I saw that day— ***Eiliyah***.

Holding my breath, I start reading it:

Eiliyah

Date: 10th January 2015

Happy Birthday, Ellie!

How long has it been since I last saw you? A good ten years!

Ten years have passed and I’m still unable to not miss you.

Ten years have gone and it still beams in my mind like it happened a moment ago—the first time I saw you on that rooftop in your white frock, holding a green dinosaur and a dog beside you.

I have seen many faces, looked into many eyes but never saw another pair like yours—a mixture of depth, sadness and despair. I was drawn immediately. Who knew at that moment that I had just met the girl who’s going to change the course of my life forever?

I was nine. I was not supposed to know what love meant. By the word 'Love' I only knew a person—mother. She left me with my grandparents while I was an infant. Then came back only to push me aside, not being able to take society's shaming, name-calling her because I was a child she never wanted. Whereas, all I wanted was a mother. A mother from whom I craved love. A mother for whose attention I was in desperate need. She is the same mother who crushed my heart into a thousand pieces. I stopped believing in Love because of the same mother who left me in the orphanage to get rid of me. She threatened me that if I ever told anyone my real name and tried to come back home, she would kill me.

So, yes, the word love became the most obsolete word until you walked into my life that night and showed me all over—how to love someone. You were only eight, and you knew all about loving someone without ever uttering the word itself. Your love to me was unconditional.

How can I forget you when you fought with others to stop beating me up in the yard that day, after the cricket match?

How can I forget you when you noticed I was shivering from cold and you gave me a sweater? God Ellie! You were only eight!

Tell me, is it possible to forget the girl who used to throw a book reading party just to cheer me up? And those nights on the roof stargazing? Who does that with an orphan boy who was living in the orphanage?

You remember, I used to fall asleep during our Arabic lessons in the mosque and you used to sneak me out sometimes?

You used to fight with everyone who mocked me.

You are the girl who gave me the taste of childhood every child deserves.

You are the girl who gave me the life I'm living right now.

You are the one who saved me from those horrors of the orphanage.

If it was not for you, I would be probably get raped in there like the other boys. You came forward and asked me to flee from there knowing that Jalil sir had been hurting me.

I still curse the day I lost you. You wrote down your new address, your house phone number and gave it to me, and I lost it.

I looked for the paper for a week on the street, on the bus. I never found it.

I went back to that old house of yours in the middle of the night despite knowing that your family had shifted from there.

I went to your school only to get beaten out from there.

Just like that, I lost everything again. I lost you! I never found you.

Life was never the same after that.

I lived on the street for a rough three months until one day a friend of Nana Bhai spotted me selling fruits on the street. As scared as I was to return home with him, then it's again the memory of you that gave me the courage to go back home. Nana Bhai banished his daughter from our life, who, leaving me in the orphanage told everyone that she'd lost me.

After coming back home, I decided to live with my head high. I decided to live my life to the fullest. I decided not to spoil the life which was given by you. I decided to choose love over hate. I decided to forgive my mother who once left me in that orphanage.

The person I've become today—it's the reflection of you.

From then till now, I have been looking for you, Ellie. I take a look at each and every face on the road, in the shopping mall, in university, and everywhere I go. Months passed, years passed by, I grew up, but still, a part of me is missing. God hid you so well, it's like until he permits, I'll never find you.

Only if I knew I was going to lose the piece of paper, I would never leave the orphanage even if it was brutal.

It was a wonder to me Ellie, it's still a wonder to me how could you manage to be so kind, so loving and so brave despite being the victim of your father's constant shame and torture? From where did you gather up the courage?

The next time we meet, I'll ask you.

The story ends. The pages are moist now from the tears my eyes have shed. My mind is in disbelief that I have found my Hussain. Whereas my heart is torn apart thinking about what kind of mother he had. I remember what Alif said once—*Raiyan has trust issues with women*. No wonder he has. When your mother abandons you and breaks your trust in the most heinous way possible, I would lose all the faith from the entire human race if I was in his place.

All these years I was in this belief that he just abandoned me whereas he didn't. We just lost each other. He was as heartbroken as me by the separation.

Why didn't you just tell me Raiyan when we first met? Why all the secrecy? We became friends before we became lovers. Why then?

I stand up holding the notebook and Mr. Dino. I start walking in the direction Raiyan went.

I need to find him. I need to ask him. I need to touch him to believe that it's all real. Isn't it strange that life has played a trick with us, separating us from each other only to get bumped into each other again while putting us through a hell lot of pain?

Even staying apart, we didn't grow apart. We grew up alike, fighting against all the odds life threw at us.

Walking a while, I find him sitting on the sand, facing the ocean, while the waves are crashing on his feet.

Without saying anything, without letting him know of my presence, I keep him watching all anew. There he is— My Hussain, My Raiyan.

How did I miss recognizing his big brown eyes? How did I forget his smile? How did I forget the way he looked at me?

Stopping by him, I sit beside him. Startled by my sudden presence, he jolts up. His gaze then drops at Mr. Dino held in my hand.

"Ellie," while he utters my name, his voice trembles, his eyes are full of sorrow, regret, and fear—a fear of losing me.

"Why didn't you just tell me, Raiyan?" I ask him.

"I was scared," he replies, "I thought you would leave me if you heard we lost each other because I lost that piece of paper. It was my fault. I still curse myself losing that paper, Ellie."

“I would never be mad at you if you told me the truth,” I say in despair. “You are someone I had been looking for all my life! I was angry, heartbroken because I thought you left me, forgot about me. You have no idea how desperately I was waiting for you to return. I went back to the orphanage. I learned how to offer salah so that I could ask God to send you back to me.”

“I never stopped looking for you Ellie. I searched for you on Google, Facebook, Instagram. I even found your ID, I guess,” he says.

“Then why didn’t you add me?”

“I did. I sent a friend request to all the Eiliyahs on social media. You never accepted it.”

“Yes, because you never told me your name was Raiyan.”

“I know.” He falls quiet again. Then after a while, he turns towards me and says, “I’m sorry for all the mishaps, Ellie. I’m sorry for all the lies. I’m sorry, because of me we lost each other. Can you forgive me?”

“Since when you know that it’s me?” I ask him.

He sighs. “When your father moved into that house, one day I saw him at the gate. I was still confused- whether it was your father as I last saw him years ago. Then few days later, you moved in. You came into the bookstore, said your name and I was pretty sure it was you. Then when one day you fell sick and I went to your house, I saw your childhood photo with your mother on the nightstand. After that, all my doubts cleared out.” He pauses, then says, “I know I could have told you earlier, but probably I’m not as brave as you think I am. I’m sorry, Ellie.”

I look into his eyes, seeing his fear of losing me only reminds me of *my* fear of losing him again. How can I make him realize that I want to hold onto him with all the force in the world?

I want to hold him with every word, every moment, and every nano second of my life and this time I'm not gonna let him slip. He and I, two friends; two lovers who bonded ages ago, are only supposed to be together and this is the truth. The only truth I'll never stop believing.

“We have gone through a lot, Raiyan. Lots of ups and downs, we've already experienced. Whereas we are only in our 20's,” saying that I take his hand into mine, holding it slipping my fingers through his I say, “our life starts here, right here, right from this moment. Enough of all the sadness and heartbreaks. You and I deserve to be happy,” I then cup his chin with both of my palms and say, “Our happiness lies within us being together. How can I let go of you again, tell me?”

Looking at me, his eyes meet mine. Resting my forehead against his I say, “My heart had fallen for you a long ago, in a time when I wasn't even able to comprehend love.” I then smile at him, while he is still scared, “You are right Raiyan, I've always been yours and I hold no doubt about that.”

While I say that, he pulls me closer to him and holds me tight against his chest. Bringing my hand closer to his lips, he leaves a soft kiss there, “I thank God every day for the moment you came into my life. And I would keep thanking him for returning you to my life again until my last day.”

We keep sitting there watching the sun dipping behind the horizon touching the ocean. For the first time in a while, I know in my heart that I've finally built the canoe to keep afloat in the ocean of life.

Epilogue

The year 2038

“Maa, you got to tell me the rest of the story. How it ends.” Sarah is following me around the house for the last half an hour.

“It’s your uncle Forhad’s wedding today. So, you better start getting ready now. We have little time left. Your father is on the way home from the office as well,” I reply.

Sarah groans. “It’ll take only thirty minutes for me to get ready.”

I roll my eyes. “Thirty minutes? Last time, when you went to the neighbor’s wedding, it took you two whole hours, Sarah.”

“So, you won’t tell me?” She stares at me, crossing her arms over her chest.

I sigh. “I will. I promise. But not now. Okay?”

She gives me the defeated look, then disappears inside her room.

Over the years, Raiyan and I built our life together. After my internship in the Netherlands, I came back to Bangladesh, took a job in a newspaper as an in-house photographer while Raiyan expanded Nana Bhai’s book business, and then two years later, we got married. A year after our marriage, Sarah was born.

Sarah, Raiyan, and I- together, we have built a little family. We sometimes bore each other out, but we are a functional one. We watch out

for one another. We even fight now and then, but we love hard as well. We know that two of us would be there, if one of us falls.

Our daughter, Sarah, has grown into a beautiful, strong, and happy teenager; yeah she rebels sometimes, but which teenager of her age doesn't? Deep inside, she knows her parents will stand beside her like a rock if anything happens to her.

Baba reached out to me when I came back from the Netherlands. I didn't hold any grudge against him, but I never relied on him, either. Some scars you carry all your life and that's okay if the scar doesn't bleed.

I did as much as possible for Baba in his last few days. He adored Sarah, and that was enough for me.

"You guys are ready?" Raiyan asks us from the bedroom door. I was fixing Sarah's eyeliner.

"Almost," I reply.

"Okay. I'm waiting outside in the car, then." He leaves as I hear him shut the door.

"Maa?"

"Hm?" I say while I'm trying to fix the corner of her eyes.

"We have a dinosaur in our house- green body with a red tongue."

"Yes, we have."

"You keep it in the closet."

"Yes, I do."

"So... Hussain came back, didn't he?"

I step back and look at her. She is smiling mischievously.

"See, I'm smart," she grins.

“That- you are, honey,” I say. She giggles.

“Why didn’t you invite him here, then?” She asks. “You two were best friends.”

I smile, “We still are best friends.”

She frowns, “Then where is he?”

I sigh. “You question a lot, Sarah. I told you, that’s a discussion for another day.”

Her face plummets again. “Fine.”

As we get inside the car, settle ourselves, Raiyan asks, “Shall we?”

“Sure,” I reply.

He starts the engine, and the car moves from our driveway to the street.

It’s December. A full-on wedding season in Dhaka. At least two buildings can be spotted with all the wedding lights on every two blocks. Dhaka adorned itself with a festive mood.

“Maa?” Sarah calls from the backseat.

“Yes, my daughter,” I reply.

“I figured it out.”

My brows furrow. I look back at her.

“What is she talking about?” Raiyan asks.

“Dad, I know you are Hussain.”

At this point, both of us fall silent for a moment and then laugh together.

“Why are you laughing? Am I wrong?” She sounds puzzled.

Raiyan and I shake our heads. “No, sweetie. You are not wrong. But how did you figure it out so soon?” I ask.

She flashes her winning grin. When she grins like that, she looks exactly like her father. “I just put the pieces together,” she shrugs.

“Smartypants!” I say.

“Well, my daughter is smart. But when did you tell her our story?” Raiyan asks.

“Today. And she was being impatient to hear the rest of the story,” I reply.

Raiyan smiles, looking at the rear-view mirror at Sarah. “We’ll tell you the rest together, happy?”

She grins. “Cool!”

Seeing my daughter and her father smiling, I find solace in my heart that was missing in both of our lives while we were a child. Raiyan and I made sure that our daughter won’t face any horrors from any of us. We might not be around her all the time, but we taught her how to fight back, how to throw a punch on the face of life when it hits hard.

As soon as we reach the wedding venue, Sarah opens the door and runs inside. She has been waiting for the wedding for a while now.

“Ellie!” Raiyan says as I was about to step outside the car.

I turn around. “Hm?”

“Look, it’s a full moon today,” he says, pointing at the sky.

I peer through the windshield. “Yes, it is.”

The moon is playing hide and seeks behind a dark cloud. It’ll rain soon or it’s already raining somewhere near. Because I can already smell the earthy scent in the air.

“I was thinking- why was the moon moving along with us?” Raiyan says.

I look at him blankly, but I laugh immediately, as I understand what he has meant. “Yeah, Raiyan, I was thinking the same. Can you tell me why?” I tease him.

He smiles. Then, leaning at me, looking into my eyes, he says, “Because the moon loves you, silly!”

THE END

Afterword

Writing Eiliyah was an emotional journey for me right from the beginning to the end. I wrote this novel when I was grieving my mother's death. I needed to escape the pain and there was no better way for me than picking up the pen and pouring words on the paper. For me, my google doc file was a canvas where I tried to paint a piece of life through Eiliyah.

Initially, I intended to write a pure love story, but then I shelved it for another time. Though I narrated a love story in Eiliyah but it's so much more than that.

Just like us, Ellie too wanted to rest her head on her father's shoulder. But despite the heartbreak she received from her father, she didn't stop living. Keeping her head high, she continued to deal with life.

Through this story, I wanted to send a message. A message of Hope. That, life can take any turn at any moment. Our most trusted person might betray us brutally, and it's possible that we might lose the person we love the most while we are already fighting the life battle. But there is always a reason to not give up. We need to find that reason even in our darkest hours.

About the Author

Born and raised in the bustling capital of Bangladesh- Dhaka, Umme Pritam has been in love with reading since her childhood, which eventually led her to writing fiction. Apart from writing, she works for a renowned financial firm in the country. She loves to hangout with her friends and travel with her husband. Eiliyah is her debut novel.

You can connect with me on:

 <https://www.ummepritam.com>

 <https://www.facebook.com/UmmePritamAuthor>

 <https://www.instagram.com/umme.pritam>