

# ONE

“Don’t forget to keep the window open tonight. Unless you want me to spend another sleepless night,” said Prabhat.

“You know that Vidhi watches every single thing I do. I share the room with her. Don’t ever forget that. Try to sleep without watching me for once,” replied Nitya in her signature soft but firm tone.

“Damn Vidhi! You know I’ll never do that.”

“Never do what? When?” asked Nitya pretending she had no clue what Prabhat was referring to.

“Please Nitya. Don’t start that again. You know what I’m saying,” he said, taking Nitya’s hand in his. “I’m serious about this.”

“Oh, but I really didn’t understand. What will you not do and when?” She asked, smiling.

“So you want to hear it again?” He held her hand harder. “I can say this a million times if you want to hear it.”

Nitya looked into Prabhat’s big eyes that shone with love for her, and prompted softly, “So, when...”

“When I am finally sharing my room with you—happy to hear that, you stubborn nut?” Prabhat smiled, as Nitya blushed. “I will not leave any space between us, so you won’t need to bother about the window.”

Prabhat’s reference to a future they were sure to spend together released a flow of emotions starting from her heart and ending in her eyes, which reflected countless promises to be together forever.

They were neighbors. Their houses were opposite one another on a narrow street that led to a busy market. They had been in love ever since they first saw each other from their bedroom windows. He was fifteen, she was just a little younger, and their bedroom windows faced each other.

While Nitya shared her room with her younger sister Vidhi, Prabhat had the luxury of a room to himself, the perks of being an only child. Nitya, however, didn’t mind sharing. The open window led to Prabhat and with him to a world where she had limitless dreams and freedom of thought.

But behind the closed window was a life marked with hardship, helplessness and misery.

A shadow of hopelessness lay over the house where she lost her doting father Shekhar to a tragic road accident. Along with her mother, Poorna, and Vidhi, Nitya had been compelled into a life of drudgery by her selfish uncle and his wife. Just nineteen years old, she bore it quietly for the sake of her mother, who didn't have the courage to break the shackles of dependency and no place to go even if she decided to do so. Poorna was resigned to her fate and instilled the same resignation in Nitya and Vidhi. She kept quiet about the injustices and was uncomplaining of the physical and emotional hardship.

Under the circumstances, Nitya had just two rays of hope; one that emitted from the roofed house opposite hers, and the other that she called Chotu—her younger sister, Vidhi. In her otherwise despairing life, Vidhi was the one person she could relate to and smile with.

Like everyone else in the cramped neighborhood, Prabhat and his parents were aware of Nitya's situation. Gajraj Kaushik, Nitya's uncle, was a public servant employed with an oil company who was able to grease his palms with public money without blinking an eye. Beenu, his wife, was a loud, mean woman. She threw her weight around, picked unnecessary fights and bossed Poorna around like she was a servant, not family.

Just as everyone knew of Gajraj and Beenu's tormenting ways, they also knew about Nitya and Prabhat's sweet love. No one could disagree that they were made for each other, but the larger truth was that Nitya's orthodox family was a bad match for the educated couple who had raised Prabhat to be a sophisticated and polished young man. But as they say, love is blind—all it saw was her tender heart and his passion. Love blossomed despite quiet opposition to it.

Prabhat fitted the description of a storybook hero. He was tall, with broad shoulders, and an endearing smile. The icing on this cake was his effortless charm and most of all his love for Nitya. His upbringing was liberal and worldly but his heart was naïve and tender. Since he had grown up loving Nitya, he considered her his most prized possession.

It did not take much imagination to understand why he was so smitten by her. Nitya was perfect. Her plaited hair swung like a rope. Her eyes were big enough for Prabhat to see his entire world in them. Her petite

frame and fair skin complemented her soft speech. She was a match for Prabhat physically, but her real beauty lay in her modesty. When she spoke, she showed an immense sense of wisdom, control and maturity. And when she smiled, it made everything seem so perfect, so pure. She was Prabhat's and accepted it without question.

He never hid this situation from his parents, ignoring their reservations. They felt that he was spending too much time on something that might not materialize. When he scored an average grade in his mid-term examinations for the first time in class eleven, his parents warned him that he was losing focus of his goals. But who can tame a wild storm that is determined to sweep everything away in its force? He managed to focus on his studies and after earning top spot in his school in the science stream that year, told his parents, "Never blame Nitya for my failures. She is my strength, not weakness." His parents left it to time, comforted by the otherwise normal conduct of their only son.



## TWO

“One bag of Doritos and a crate of Bud Light, please.”

Prabhat was lost in his memories.

“Excuse me! You aren’t here or what?”

Prabhat was rudely brought back to reality in the convenience store he ran for a living.

“Sorry, mate. What did you say you wanted? I’ll just get it,” said Prabhat, or Perry, as he was known in London, his home for the past seven years.

Having dealt with the customer, Prabhat wondered why he had suddenly thought of Nitya. He turned on the radio to distract himself, but knew he couldn’t banish her so easily.

He was miserable on his way home that evening. He had spent the entire day struggling with thoughts of a past he had put aside seven years ago.

He had someone else in his life now—his wife Meeta; the woman who had accepted him as he was, offering him gentle companionship in return. Meeta’s presence had injected a spark of meaning into his hollow existence. He was grateful to her, even though he had never really said it in so many words.

They married three years ago when he had gone back to visit his parents. His mother had schemed with her friend to throw Prabhat and Meeta together. While Meeta had no reason to say no to her mother’s choice for her, Prabhat couldn’t care less. He had married her for his mother. The four years before that had hardened him against love, and an arranged marriage seemed the most logical next step.

Aware of Prabhat’s past love, Meeta had initially wondered if he would find it difficult to accept her. She realized how wrong she was. Prabhat began this new chapter in his life with a strong sense of responsibility, and ensured that Meeta settled seamlessly into his world and life. She decided never to bring his past up with him. They were happy.

As he reached home that evening, Meeta looked chirpier than usual. Prabhat could sense that there was news from India. It was an unspoken arrangement—Meeta was the connection between him and their families. He did call his parents to wish them on birthdays and festivals, but it was Meeta who managed the day-to-day family updates.

He exchanged ritual pleasantries with Meeta and surfed channels while she was occupied in the kitchen. After a hard day at the store, Meeta's chatty disposition would relax him in minutes. It amused him how she had so much to talk about each day. Prabhat had to admire his wife's unflagging enthusiasm for mundane things like shopping for flowers or boarding the tube.

As they sat down to dinner Meeta said, "Ma called this morning."

Prabhat didn't lift his head from his bowl of noodles. Meeta was a fantastic cook and he wanted to concentrate on eating.

Meeta cleared her throat, "I said Ma called."

"Which Ma?" Prabhat surrendered to the conversation.

"Mine."

"All well?" he asked, still engrossed in his food.

"She's coming here," replied Meeta.

Prabhat chewed thoughtfully, pretending sorrow.

"Ya, ya! Look sad. But there's no escaping it. It's that time of the year again, baby. Even as you sulk, *Bhaiya* is booking her flight."

"Great!" Prabhat swallowed his food. "And I'm not running anywhere. You're happiest when she is here, which makes me happy." Prabhat finished his meal and got up to put his bowl in the kitchen.

'And that's why I love him so much,' Meeta thought. She was content that her husband tried to keep her happy. Could she have asked for more? Perhaps. She was aware of the unfinished business that no one ever spoke of, Nitya—the love of his life.



## THREE

“What name did you say, Mummy?” asked Prabhat as his mother-in-law discussed a prayer meeting they had to attend. She was insisting that they accompany her to the home of a friend—now settled in London—who had lost her daughter-in-law.

“Rajveer,” replied Meeta’s mother.

The name rang a bell, but Prabhat couldn’t quite place it.

“Can we drop you there and pick you up when you’re done?” Meeta asked her mother.

“Why? Do you have a problem meeting new people? It’s a sad day for them. And it won’t take much time anyway,” her mother said.

Meeta gave up and looked at Prabhat who had moved to a corner of the room. “Buddy, if you have a good reason to avoid going, step right in, please.”

“We’ll go. It will take an hour to reach the place, Mummy. Be ready by ten tomorrow morning,” Prabhat ended the conversation.

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Meeta and Prabhat’s mothers had been friends and colleagues for thirty years. As his mother’s closest friend, Meeta’s mother knew what he had gone through.

Meeta’s parents were separated and she grew up watching her single mother take the reins of her life in her hands and manage her two kids. She never understood why her parents fought but she knew that her mother never shed a tear when her father left. While her mother worked, Meeta and her brother were raised by their maternal grandmother who blamed her daughter for the divorce.

Meeta’s impressionable young mind segregated women in two kinds—there were those, like her mother, who sacrificed marriage for their ambitions, and those who sacrificed ambition for love.

She had first met Prabhat as a teenager and was almost magically drawn to him. He had been a little distracted. She still remembered how

she thought about him for days. Later, of course, she realized that what she had mistaken for confusion was actually his commitment towards another girl.

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The next morning Meeta's mother caught her admiring herself in front of the mirror. As she draped her *sari* around her waist, Meeta couldn't help but notice her graceful body in the mirror. Her tall dusky frame was the perfect Indian body for the perfect Indian drape.

"Next time I'm here, you better be expecting some good news," Meeta's mother said, disrupting her daughter's moment of self-admiration.

"Mom! Stop. Don't let Prabhat hear you. He doesn't like anyone mentioning a child," exclaimed Meeta.

"I'm going to brainwash him today," declared her mother.

"I'm not coming with you then. Don't arm-twist me Ma, I am an adult now." Meeta knew that if her mother brought up the topic of grandchildren it would trigger a cold war between Prabhat and her mother that would last for the duration of her visit.

It was a sunny day, quite unexpected for that time of the year. They settled into the car and headed out for the prayer meeting. Apparently, last minute birth complications had led to the woman's untimely death. As they approached the building where the prayer meeting was being held, Prabhat could see the deceased's family members dressed in white and shades of somber creams. He tried to find the bereaved husband from amongst the crowd so he could convey his condolences and recede into the background quickly.

Meeta's mother pointed to a figure and whispered to them, "That's Rajveer, her husband. I remember him from the wedding."

Prabhat had another fleeting sensation of familiarity. He was about to connect the dots when Rajveer turned to face them.

The world seemed to stop. Prabhat's mouth went dry. He didn't see Rajveer extend his hand. Nitya's face was spinning around in his head and he couldn't breathe.

"Are you okay, sir?" Rajveer asked in concern.

"Are you Rajveer Malhotra?" demanded Prabhat in a hoarse voice.

“Yes, I’m Rajveer Malhotra.”

“Nitya...” Prabhat pointed at the house. “Nitya is dead?”

Meeta froze. She was hearing that name after a long time. She recalled how Prabhat had asked Meeta to meet him before they were married. He had told her about Nitya and how she had ‘dumped’ him to marry someone else. He had left it up to Meeta to decide if she could spend her life with a man who was emotionally drained—first loving and then hating Nitya. She had agreed, and the topic had never come up again in the three years of their married life.

But today Prabhat’s past was staring him in the face. He was looking at the man to whom he had lost his first love.

The only one who seemed to be in control now was Rajveer. He held a shocked Prabhat by his forearm and led him inside the hall with Meeta following close behind. Rajveer left Prabhat in the middle of the hall. He walked towards a framed picture of his beautiful wife, clad in a red *sari*, a huge red *bindi* on her forehead, and a smile that was now lost forever. As he neared the picture he stopped and looked back.

“Look at her, Prabhat!”

Prabhat sank to his knees and buried his face in his hands. Meeta sat beside him helplessly.

Rajveer spoke again, “Look at her, Prabhat. This is Latika. My wife.”

Prabhat suddenly stopped shaking. He looked up at the picture.

