



'FINALLY AN AUTHOR I CAN RECOMMEND TO THOSE WHO ASK ME
WHICH INDIAN AUTHOR THEY SHOULD READ,'
AHALYA NAIDU - LITERARY ANGELS

LEMON *Girl*

JYOTI ARORA

LEMON GIRL

By: Jyoti Arora

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DEDICATION

In earlier times, Indian women suffered in the name of culture. Now it's being done in the name of loss of culture. The one thing that hasn't changed though is that the women are still being blamed for their own injuries. And they are still expected to submit to the blame, even if innocent, and sink into the ground.

I dedicate this book to every girl and woman who refused to take the blame for others' faults. Who, even when trodden down, dared to stand up and create a new and better life for herself. I offer this book as a salute to such brave and determined ladies.

~*~

Within the heart of every person hides a love
story Just waiting to be told
Come, let's follow the rhythm of these two heartbeats
And unfold the tales they do hold.

~*~

Chapter 1

Nirvi:

'It's all your fault.'

Yes, I said those words today, those very same words.

From the rotten womb of the past they rose up on their own, spurting like poison to my tongue and burning my heart and soul in their passage.

Words they are only. Vibrations of air.

But words can possess a shadow invincible enough to rob even a soul of its eternity sometimes.

'It's all your fault,' I spat out the words over Nikita, the most fashionable and stylish girl in this girls' hostel. 'All your fault.'

It felt good.

And I want to shout out those words again, as loudly as possible, and for as long as I have voice. Maybe then my heart would be clear of their stain. I have borne their burden long enough already.

But there is no one to listen to me now. The girls have all gone into Nikita's room. I heard the sound of sobbing coming from that room. I heard Nikita's boyfriend being called a brute and cursed by many different mouths speaking in the same tone. I also heard them calling me heartless and insensitive.

Maybe I am, both. I don't care.

But how, Arsh, do I stop my mind from sinking back into the past? To the time, five years ago, when those same words had been spoken to me?

I have pulled myself out in the hostel's garden. Don't know whether to finish this painting that I'm making for school, or to scowl at my past undisturbed. Scowl at the day that had blessed me and cursed me all together. I am still carrying the curse with me. The blessing I have left far behind. It was but a fake.

It's been six months since I came away from you. Six months! And yet...

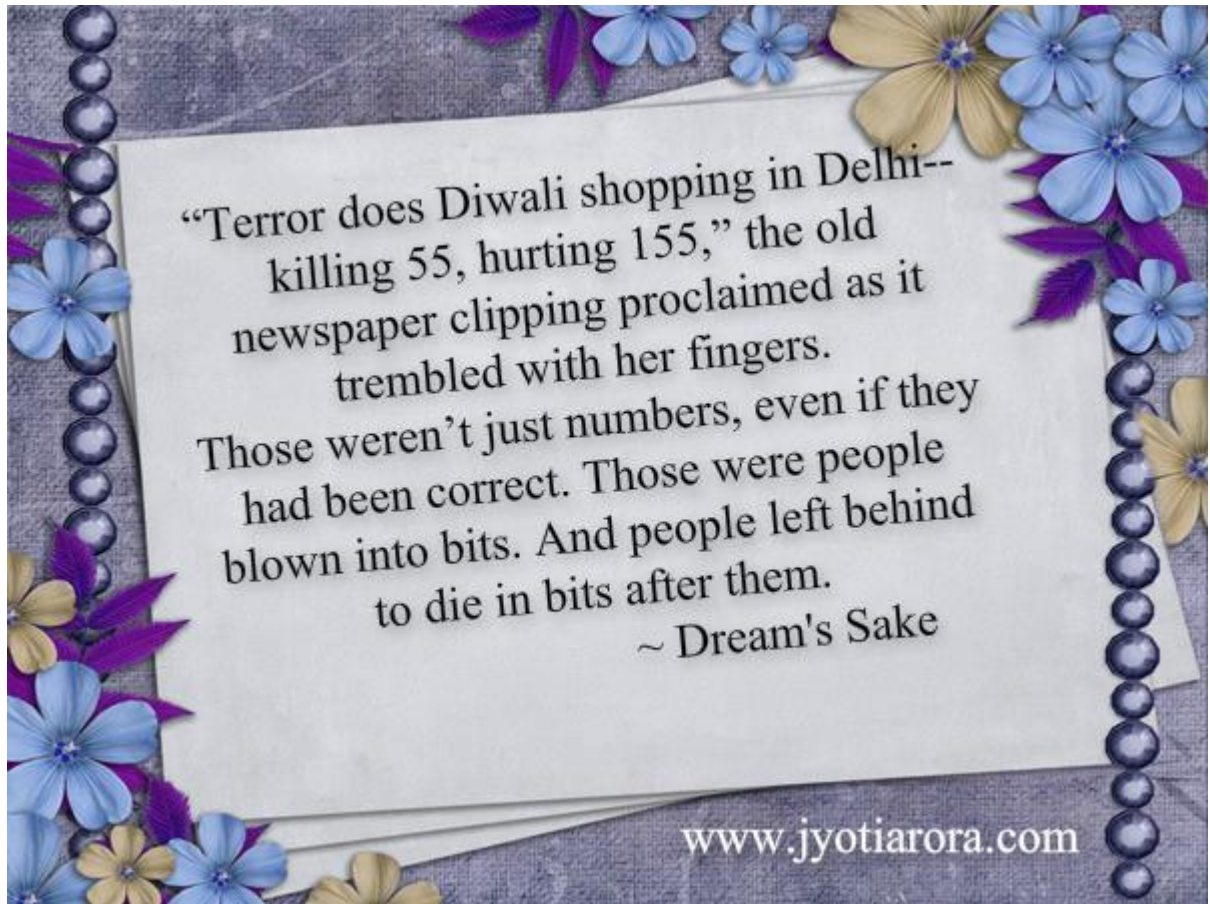
Why can't I stop? Why can't I stop thinking of you, Arsh? Of you, your eyes, your grin, your anger, your blunderings, your words...

Every day that passes finds my heart deeper in your hold. And the moments I hadn't even noticed have become unforgettable now. And here, in the pale gleams of this winter sunshine, I see you again. And hear you again.

Even your very first words to me, 'Hey, Lemon Girl, watch out!'

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 2

Arsh:

When it's time for you to fall in love, even a lemon can become the cause of it. In my case, there were a full dozen of them.

However, when even love affairs begun by roses and chocolates fall to ruts, I should have expected nothing better from the one begun by lemons and a fight.

Actually, I hadn't. I hadn't expected it to be anything more than that one fight. Never knew that one day, we'll encounter each other again, and how.

All I was thinking of at that evening, about five years ago, was to buy some palatable grub to help me survive the non-eating of the food that our land lady forced upon all her paying guests. After ordering what I wanted, I turned away to allow the guy behind the counter some privacy to cheat me out of a pack of biscuits. While he packed my order, minus that one pack of biscuits, I turned to carry on my manly duty of 'sightseeing.' Unfortunately, though a lot was stuffed in the radius of my sight, little of it was worth seeing. And amid all the melodies of the two, three and four wheelers pushing their way through the competing human mass, nothing at all appeared worth hearing.

But I believe the ears of the masculine gender of the species called humans are naturally trained to pick up the sound of girls, even from the collective wails of the entire remaining animal kingdom. Like a trained archer's arrow, the sound hits the target every time.

Well, the sound that hit me was that of a girl laughing. Nothing like a tinkling of silver bells or the soft song of a brook as lovers boast their ladies to posses. It was a robust sound, open and frank and entirely careless of what the world might think of it.

It was not very hard to find the source of that sound as the laughing beauty was not making any effort to tone down her voice or her laugh. She just didn't give a damn. She was free, freely she talked, freely she laughed, and freely she walked, not caring who or how many were staring at her.

And many were staring at her actually. Though she was not of the kind that guys usually turn to gawk at. And I'm still wondering why I did.

A nice and polite estimation would have called her chubby. Her lemony yellow tunic over the blue jeans did try to hide that chubbiness. But it didn't seem to matter all that much anyway. She was not fat, and I'd have challenged anyone then and there had anyone called her that. Her hair was short and curly and was busy rocking this way and that in the wind, and getting arranged and re-arranged at every new moment. And how she walked! With big steps, swinging her hands as if trying to make something topple out from the shopping bags she was holding.

But she had the most feel-good face I had ever seen. You know, the kind of face that makes you feel good just to look at it, even if it bears no dazzling beauty to boast about. But of course, she was pretty too. Sweet looking, fair, lovely eyes, gorgeous eyes, actually. And her smile was one of the most contagious ones I had ever seen, or had succumbed to. And she was fun, fun to watch, fun to listen to as well.

'You are stupid, Kusum,' she was saying to her friend. The name suited the friend well. She was quite pretty and was dressed in pink. She had long hair and nails, big danglers in her ears and colourful bangles adorning her fair arms. And even in a vegetable market she was walking on high heels.

But despite all her adornments, and slimmer figure, my eyes somehow didn't find Kusum as interesting as her friend.

'Had I been in your place, I would have walked straight up to him, put my hands like this,' this more interesting friend was saying, putting her thumbs to either side of her head, raising her fingers like horns. The two heavy bags she was holding dangled near her ears, as if well used to such manoeuvres. What a sight that was. But a still prettier sight was about to come. 'I would have stuck my tongue out and stared back at him,' she said, and stuck her tongue out, right in the middle of the market, and opened her eyes as wide as they could be opened, showing exactly what she would have done. 'How dare he stare and whistle at you?' she added, letting her tongue do the talking before poking it out again.

'You are silly, that would only make you look ridiculous. Besides, he was handsome,' said Kusum, looking down on her clothes and making sure her dupatta was perfectly arranged, its every fold right where it should be.

'You are silly. But hey, those lemons look good. I'll buy some. Rishi bhaiya is home for weekend, and he loves lemonade.' She marched up to the nearby vegetable seller, a boy who looked the same age as she, but was half her size.

I picked up my order from the shop's counter and stepped down to go to my room. And yet I lingered.

I should have walked away then.

But it came into my head that a cold glass of lemonade would be great to help me bear the humid stuffiness of my room. In short, I needed lemons too.

I walked up to the same vegetable seller, but waited patiently while she dealt with him.

'Are you a vegetable seller or a robber?' she was saying. She brought on a very deep frown on her face. It might have worked in making her look angry, had she been able to control the child that kept laughing out from her eyes, from her barely controlled smile, and from the lilting tones of her prattle.

'Didi, you can ask anyone, that's the rate. I'm not taking any more than the rate,' said the guy.

'You have all fixed the rate too high. The market is full of robbers,' her scowl deepened, her voice became louder. So desperately was she trying to appear enraged.

'What are you saying, Didi? What are we to do if the vegetables are getting expensive? We have to feed our families too,' the boy said to her.

'How many children do you have?' she asked.

'I'm not married yet,' said the guy, breaking out in a shy smile.

'Oh, look at him smiling, Kusum, I'm sure he is thinking of his girlfriend. You are thinking of your girlfriend, aren't you?' she asked, before Kusum could even nod.

'What are you saying, Didi, I don't have a girlfriend,' said the boy.

'Liar,' she cried out, in a voice that made at least a dozen heads turn. 'I'm sure you have one. What is her name? Is she pretty? Is she a vegetable seller too? I'm sure she must be a cheat like you.'

'No, she is very nice, she works as a housemaid,' the boy couldn't help but confess. 'See, See, I knew you were lying. And for that, you'd have to give me these lemons at my rate. It's your punishment for lying to me.'

'Didi, now you are robbing your brother,' the boy said.

'Hey, I never called you my brother. My brother is not like you. He would never try to rob his sister. Now come on, hurry. Give me the lemons, and here's the money,' she said, slapping two notes down on a pile of green chillies. 'Hurry, hurry, hurry,' she sang.

The boy had no option but to pick the two notes and hand her the bag of her chosen lemons.

That guy was either a fool or very generous, as most guys allow themselves to be when it comes to girls. She had stripped him of all his profit and yet he was smiling and wanting her to come back and do it again.

'Don't you want anything else, Didi?' he asked as she stepped away.

'Not from you, you are a cheat and a liar. But I'll pray you get married to your girlfriend soon. If she is good, she will cure you and then you won't rob people as you do,' she said as she walked away, mutely followed by Kusum.

As soon as her march started, so did the swinging of the bags she was holding.

I forgot that I had wanted to buy lemons too. I stepped away from the stall and just stood watching her walk away. While Kusum picked her way carefully through the dirty road, *she* marched on looking quite unconcerned about the road, the traffic and the bags in her hands.

They started talking, though it sounded like a one-sided conversation. While her voice could be heard clearly enough, Kusum either was not speaking, or in a very low voice. She must have known that her companion didn't really care for her responses, content as she was listening to her own magnificent voice and superb opinions.

So that companion talked on, and walked on, almost blindly, letting others make way for her or risk getting trodden down.

And then there came that cyclist. Even I could read the intention in his eyes and grin. Both of them had only one target.

Though I do believe that target was Kusum, yet the alarm that I rang out was, 'Hey, Lemon Girl, watch out!'

The cyclist came up on them just as she swung around towards me. As she swung, her bag of lemons swung along as well and banged into the cyclist. His grin turned into a cry and he sped down to taste dirt. That was good. Fit place for him.

But down too went the lemons as the bag burst and spilled its contents on the road.

For a moment, I was worried about the cyclist, fearing she might get in her head to stamp her foot on his face for trying to collide into her friend. But instead, she whirled up to me.

'What did you call me?' she asked.

'Lemon Girl.' I should not have grinned as I said that, but some things just can't be helped.

'Do I look like a lemon to you?' she asked.

I looked at her bright lemony tunic and grinned again. Yes, I can go totally out of my head sometimes, grinning at most inappropriate times. That happened to be one of the worst of them.

Her eyes opened wide and glared at me. She probably wanted me to cower down with fear at that glaring look. But that is never my way of dealing with a glare, stare, frown or scowl. Besides, I had lost myself in marvelling at her eyes. I still wonder if that was because they were big, beautiful and had long eye lashes, or because of the laughter that twinkled in them even when they frowned. Whatever it was, I only know that as they stared at me, I stared back.

'How dare you stare at me and grin like that?' she asked.

When someone orders me to stop smiling, not that many dare, I consider it my duty to grin broader. And that's what I did then. Besides, I couldn't have helped it either. Even she looked as if she was enjoying the scene and finding it funny. I'm sure she was already planning out the words in which she was to describe it, and me, to her friends.

And then, it was kind of hard to mind her anger.

When I failed to answer, she gave a jerk to her head and raised her eyebrows.

'I don't know your name and you were buying lemons and...' I began to explain.

'Tomorrow if you see me buying shoes, will you call me a shoe girl?'

'Not if you tell me your real name,' I said, folding my arms, pulling myself straight to my full height, raising my head even higher and looking down on her.

But she was not the one to cower down with any high and mighty display.

'My name is none of your business,' she declared. 'And if you call me Lemon Girl ever again, I'll come and squirt some real lemon juice in your eyes to teach you what a lemon can do. So there, *you* watch out.'

With this, she turned on her heels and walked back to Kusum who by then had made two young boys to gather most of the spilled lemons for her. The cyclist, meanwhile, had made good his escape.

'Have you got all?' my still furious lady asked her friend.

'No,' said Kusum, 'they have rolled all over.'

'Let them be, let's go.'

But I had to call her back again to return to her the little round thing that had come rolling towards me.

'Hey, Lemon Girl, here's one of your lemons,' I called out.

'Cut it and squeeze it in your eyes,' she called back and continued on her way.

I grinned and stowed the lemon in my pocket. A moment later, my ears caught a loud laugh from the lemon's rightful owner. So she had already started making fun of me. Strangely though, it did not raise my hackles up and, well, felt kind of good.

All this had taken place when I was very near the end of my engineering course. Just three months were left before I and my friends were to give our professors the pleasure of seeing us leave the college for good. Those three months passed away swiftly.

Those were the last three months of my student life. And I believe I studied harder during that time than I had ever done. The reason was that there was a very real danger of my failing in most of my exams, unless some drastic changes were brought about in my study schedule. And I could not fail. I wouldn't have minded it all that much had both my parents not been such proud holders of degrees from IIT, and much respected professors in much respected universities. And my elder sister and her husband were both earning big bucks in an MNC. My younger sister was already through one successful year in a medical school. I, on the other hand, had already failed them all by not getting admission in any decent college. I could not fail them again by failing even in the damndest little hole I had got myself into.

So I studied hard for the last three months. More would have been useless. I was not going to become a NASA scientist even if I had studied more, you know.

I visited the market often enough though during those three months, but I never saw her again.

The lemon she had given me stayed at my table for a full week. If I could have pressed it in a notebook like a rose, I would have, as the memorabilia of a memorable girl. But a lemon isn't a rose. Its purpose is not to evoke sensations of love and romance, but to quench thirst and strengthen the body's immunity. So after a week, on a particularly hot day, I helped it to fulfil its life's purpose. And with a chilled glass of lemonade in my hand, I thought of my Lemon Girl and shook my head and laughed at her and like her, just as I believed she would have laughed at me.

I wondered if I would ever hear that laugh again.

And five years later, I am wondering that once again. Have I robbed it off her forever? It's almost six months since she ran away from here. Ran away in shame. Because of me. How could I have been such a senseless brute!

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 3

Nirvi:

It is the law of nature that the life that gets ripped away is not to be brought back.
Why did you bother?

Your Lemon Girl was dead. She should have remained dead. For when dead people return to life, they can only raise fear and repulsion in the heart of the living ones.

We must all stick to our places. Living ones to life, dead ones to their graves, and people from previous birth to the dark alleys of forgetfulness.

Why didn't you?

I lived but in a castle of sand that I had erected around me. It was my only shelter. You had no right to come and flood it away.

You had no right to trespass the boundary of my forgotten life. You had no right to come back, leaving the door behind you ajar. You stood staring at me there, in the pub, wanting me to look at you. But how could I have looked at you, Arsh, when the door that you had opened instantly started sucking in all the air around me? And me along with it. I died again the instant I saw you. The world around me started melting into my past, and my past sucked me reeling back to it.

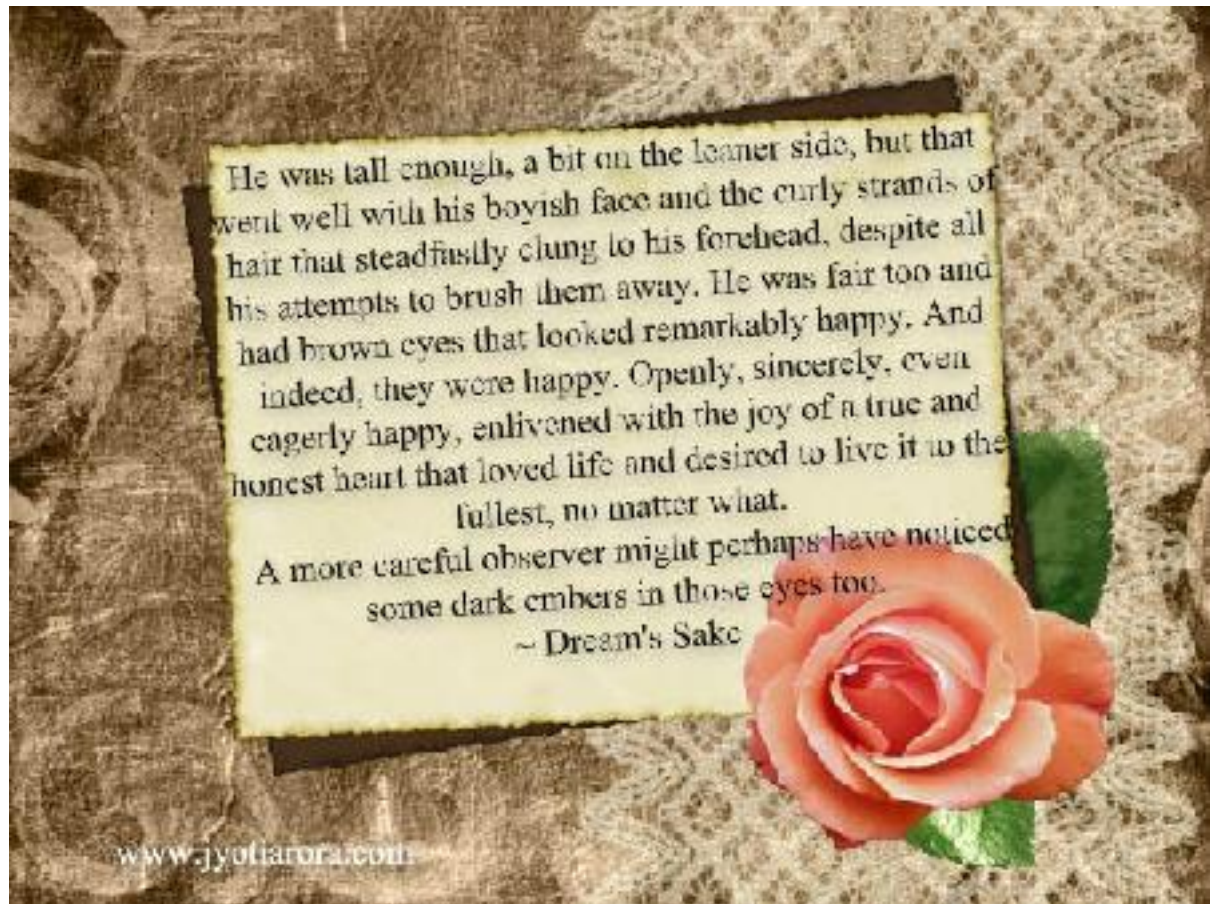
But not to the life in which you had first seen me.

For between that life and this lies a hell.

And into this hell you forced me again.

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 4

Arsh:

Memory has never been something that I have ever boasted of as my strength, as my parents and teachers would gladly, or sadly, attest. There are some moments in life though that have their own unique way of taking over a portion of your brain, usurping the land and building a house for themselves, whether you like it or not. And then every time you let your thoughts wander that way, their inhabitants rush out and usher you into their house and then you can't help but reminiscence of old times with them.

Such a house Lemon Girl had erected in my mind despite the shortness of our meeting and despite it being passed away mostly in fighting.

It was not that I remembered her night and day and pined for the loss of my love-at-first-sight. I did not love her and I did not pine for her. It was only when I thought of her that I wished I could meet her again. And every time a lemon appeared before my eyes, so did the Lemon Girl. In all her robust glory. Her voice had been loud enough to ring clear in my ears despite the distance of months and years. And as my imagination controlled her now, the poor helpless babe talked the talk I gave her and walked the walk I gave her. And we had much fun chastising people that needed to be chastised, mocking people that seemed to be constructed for that very purpose or just having a blast challenging each other's wit.

I believed that she would soon have forgotten me. But I didn't want to forget her.

I don't live in a forest and she was not the only girl I ever saw. But she is still the most interesting girl I have ever seen, in whose eyes life seemed to laugh as boisterously as she did.

After college got over, real life, as they say, started in Bangalore. And it soon gave a lie to my previous belief that nothing could be more stressful than the impossible expectations that Engineering professors harbour from their trapped victims. As a result, memories and reminiscences started having longer and longer to wait before my mind got the freedom to have a chat with them. Sometimes they intruded by themselves, but were often pushed away for there were projects to be completed and deadlines to be met. And as the years passed, my Lemon Girl understood that I had no time for her. As I said, a lemon managed to conjure her up still. But she refused to linger for long and rushed away quickly.

Three years passed away in Bangalore. But the previous year didn't much like that city and pulled me to Gurgaon.

Okay, I was rather pushed to it by having a tiff with my boss, which by no means was my fault. He needed to be talked to and since nobody else dared, I fulfilled my duty and did my best to set him right. But something somehow went wrong in the process and I found myself without a job.

My enjoyment of the leisure of life lasted two months. And after two months, I accepted the duty of trying a different boss in a different company. With bags and baggage I came to Gurgaon and, to ease the process of settling down, started trying out all the night spots that the place could boast of.

Now, being so near the city where I had met my Lemon Girl seemed to give her memory some sort of licence to come visiting me again and again. But I never imagined that just as her memory had started coming uninvited, so would she. And that one evening, muffled amid the sounds of the hard rock echoing in a pub, I would hear the unmistakable sound of my Lemon Girl laughing.

Imagine finding a still unreleased Smartphone in the pile of ordinary feature phones. I couldn't believe it for a moment. Had I really heard her? Or had the music played some trick on me?

I couldn't be sure as the laugh was silenced instantly. And what followed it was tinkling affectation of merriment, a soft and sophisticated sound that seemed to examine its every note as it murmured out with measured elegance.

Both kinds of laughter had risen up from the group standing behind me. I turned, a grin right in place to greet the robust lady. She was not to be missed, of course. Even amid the crowd of hundreds, she could easily be seen and heard. Or so I thought. But as it happened, she was nowhere.

The group had two guys and two girls. None of the girls had the dimensions of my Lemon Girl. One was too short and dainty. The other was tall enough, but slim, with a body and dress that boasted of careful attention to it and, well, seemed to demand the same from all around. She had long hair, straight, shiny, and let loose. My Lemon Girl had short and curly hair, didn't she?

'But that was surely her I heard. It was her laugh, maybe she has walked off to get a drink,' thought I. A grumble of protest rose up in my head. Somehow, the idea of her having anything stronger than a lemonade didn't feel pleasant to me.

I did look around though and scanned the crowd. But she was not there. Having nothing else to do, I turned and focussed my eyes back on the slender beauty standing nearby. She stood tall on high heels. On her hand gleamed a huge ring, matching the shades of her dark dress. Though I couldn't make out whether it was black or dark green. A glittering bracelet hugged her wrist. That might have impressed me by attesting her wealth, had it not been too thick and expensive looking to be real.

And then, before I could notice anything else, I saw her looking at me. Her big eyes looked confused for an instant and then her brows frowned.

I knew that frown.

Her eyes widened.

I knew those eyes.

A grin appeared again on my face, ready in expectation of her smile of recognition. But instead of smiling, she took a step backwards. Pushed, as if, by a physical blow. Her hands clenched into fists.

'Is she still so angry with me?' That even topped the longest grudge I had ever had.

I took a step closer to her. She stepped backwards and folded her arms. I could see her digging her fingers into her skin. She stepped closer to one of the guy standing there, lowered her head, and shut me out.

In my turn, I shut the world out and looked only at her, trying to find my Lemon Girl in that fashionable woman. What an astonishing transformation she had gone through in four years! I stared at her eyes as much as I could in the dim light of the pub. There was glitter of makeup on them but the glimmer of laughter was gone. Her own laughter was gone. It was trespassed over by a measured, tinkling sound that irritated me again and again as she responded to the jokes of her group. She was chatting busily, laughing often, and openly clinging to one of the guys. And she never cast another look my way.

But I would not have it so. For four years she had lived in my mind. Now that she was there before me, I was not going to let her ignore me as if I was nothing to her.

Okay, well, a ten minute fight did not really give me a right upon her attentions. But four years of constantly disturbing me with her memory seemed to do so. She had talked often enough to me in my mind, she was going to talk to me now too. I will make her.

So, as soon as she separated from the group, I stepped over to her and held out my hand.

'Hi, remember me? We met in...'

She side-stepped me and walked away without even looking.

'I'm Arsh, by the way,' I said, following her.

She clenched her fists.

'And shall I call you a Lemon Girl still?' I persisted.

'Don't' call me,' she threw back at me without turning.

'But listen, Lemon Girl,' I did call out.

She stopped, took a whole moment before turning, 'Nirvi. My name is Nirvi. And that is Sam, Samarth, my boyfriend and my live-in partner.' If ever there was defiance mocking itself in its own assertion, then there I saw it. It cindered in her eyes, it trembled in her voice. But she stood firm.

'Must be quite a guy if you chose to live-in with him,' I said.

I must confess it took me a moment to form that reply after such a revelation. And I do wish I had recovered quicker, disappointing her by showing no sign of shock or surprise. But I'm afraid she won over that battle. And she revelled in it by folding her arms and fixing her dark eyes at me.

'He is the best man in the whole world and I love him,' she said.

The words didn't surprise me. I guess girls do often, and should always, think so about their boyfriends. But then, I believe such an assertion should have at least a little spirit accompanying it, some happy spark in the eyes, some zest proving the veracity of the feeling if not the claim.

'That's great,' I said, shrugging. 'You are a lot changed,' I added.

A smile appeared on her face, though it was only a tired and bored kind of spreading of lips. 'I guess I have learned to behave myself. You won't find me shouting in the streets now,' she said.

And then she spun around and walked away, with the quickness of an escape. She clearly didn't want my company.

But I wanted hers.

'So you do remember me,' I said. That felt nice.

She mumbled something but I could not catch the words.

She was not going to welcome me into her group. But all of a sudden, I wanted nothing else but that. Don't know why. Maybe because for four years she had lived in my mind as a chubby, bubbly and bold girl. And now that I had been robbed off that image, by someone who seemed a trespasser in her own skin, I believed I had a right to know why.

I saw the other girl in the group, the short one, making her way through the crowd. I stepped closer to her, ready to offer her a supporting arm in case she stumbled. Not that she was drunk or anything, I just thought that she might stumble. And she did stumble because my hand happened to accidentally push away a chair just when she happened to lean on it while stopping to chat with someone. But no harm was done. I caught her, and held her, smiling reassurance into her eyes.

'Hey, thanks,' she said.

'My pleasure,' I said, quite honestly.

'Tiya,' she said, offering me her hand.

'Arsh,' I responded.

'You are new here? I never saw you before,' said Tiya.

She had all the fashion assortments right in place. From head to foot, she was dressed in branded extravaganza. But there are some girls who, even when dressed as a cat woman, would still appear sweet. Maybe it is something to do with their manner of speaking or looking at you. Something there is that betrays instantly that behind the fashion showcase hides the picture of a sweet and sensitive girl still in her ponytails. So Tiya appeared to me at that time. And so she has proved herself to be since.

I smiled at her and said, 'Yes, I'm new. Was in Bangalore till now. Left all my friends there, so now am trying to make some new ones.'

'Oh? Then I am your friend from now on. And come with me and I'll introduce you to my friends. All my friends welcome all my friends.'

But she had overestimated her power over her group. Or maybe her words would have proved true if two of the people in her group had not been from the group that I had fought with.

One of these unwelcoming persons was Nirvi, of course. The other, call it divine retribution if you will, was the one on whose head I and my college buddies had poured our retribution aplenty in our college days. Of all the people in Gurgaon, Nirvi had to choose him!

Yes, I am talking about Samarth, Sam, Nirvi's boyfriend. He had done justice to his name, and surprisingly so.

I didn't recognize him at first. And so, I readily extended my hand to him when Tiya introduced us.

A slight touch of fingers was the handshake Sam allowed me. He had recognized me, while I still was in the dark.

'Arsh, CPR College,' he said, attesting by those words that he knew me too well.

And then I looked at him closely, and looked back at my memories of four years ago, and finally knew him. He had shaved his moustache and got rid of his glasses, and that had made all the difference. But with his thin frame and tall height, he still looked like a flat pole shaking in the wind. He was dressed in a skinny T-shirt which made him look skinnier than usual. He had gel in his hair, a fancy watch on his wrist, expensive boots on his large feet, and he stood in a pub with two gorgeous girls. And all this looked as comfortable on him as a cigarette in the mouth of a kid who is afraid his friends would know this is his first time, and also afraid his parents would know that he is smoking.

He was Sam the PP, Professor's Pet. He had pursued Engineering in Information Technology through the same years and college that I used to chase my Engineering Degree in Computer Science. He neither was very intelligent nor very close to being a class topper, even in the college that could never boast of admitting even one class topper. But he knew the art of becoming the Professor's Pet by dint of obeying their every whim, fancy or command.

While I tried my best to uphold the reputation of our college, he went against it by being dutiful and studious. And once, when some professors tried to trap their students in compulsory extra classes, he and four more like him displayed the extremities of their insanity by attending them against the order circulated by us. Even the professors proved to be wiser than them and remained absent.

Of course, the sense of justice demanded that the defectors be set to right. And they were set to right. Since they loved learning so much, a thorough lesson was given to them.

And as Sam looked at me now and we shook hands, I could see that he had yet not forgotten the education we had bestowed on him.

From him, I turned to greet Nirvi again.

She met me as a total stranger and, for once, I obeyed and reciprocated. She kept her distance from me. Well, I too kept my distance from her, forcing even my eyes and ears to do their function properly instead of focussing in just one direction.

Our meeting lasted for half an hour, though Nirvi did all she could to cut it shorter.

'I am so tired I can't stand one minute longer,' she complained.

I noticed she was sweating a bit too much and looked quite white and shaken.

'Lean on my arm,' said Sam, without looking at her.

'It is too stuffy here. I am feeling dizzy. Let us leave, Sam. I'm feeling really dizzy,' she added when her first complaint refused to move Sam enough to leave his drink.

'Have a drink, you'll feel better,' said Sam.

'What you need is food,' said Tiya, holding Nirvi's hand. 'I wish we were at home. I learned a new dish yesterday. And it is so delicious. You'd have eaten it whole despite your dieting crap. Why are you starving yourself like this? I'm sure you have not eaten even half a bite all day.'

'I am not starving myself. I am only trying to lose some weight. I don't want my Sam to be stuck with a fat girl. But what has happened to the music of this place? It's intolerable. Let's leave, Sam.'

'What has happened to your taste? This song is awesome, much better than the tortures you used to like. Be quiet now and listen,' said Sam.

'Uh, uhh, hold my hand, Sam. I am sure I am going to faint, everything is getting dark,' she said, putting one hand on her forehead and pressing the other on Sam's shoulder, leaning heavily towards him. Her eyes fluttered as if they were on the verge of blacking out.

'Hey, don't faint, don't faint,' he said, wrapping his arms around Nirvi. 'Sorry, guys, we'll have to leave now. But why don't you two come to our home? I bought a new game. Let's have a Playstation tournament tonight,' he said to his friend.

'As dumb as ever. The fool really thinks she is fainting,' I thought to myself.

'Uhh...' Nirvi groaned, forcing Sam to turn and get ready to leave.

But I would not have it so. She had played her game. Now was my turn.

'It was great meeting you again, buddy,' I said, before Sam could lead Nirvi away.

I saw Sam studying my face. I could also almost see him re-living the lesson we had given him and wondering at the last word I had used.

'I always enjoy meeting an old friend and college buddy, no matter what might have happened between us in the past,' I added, putting my right hand on his shoulder.

His frown deepened and the past glared back at me from his eyes.

Ok, then I did the mistake of letting my eyes slip a little towards the girl leaning on his shoulder. And though slow he maybe in everything else, Sam was quick to catch that shift.

Pride sneered from his eyes and a grin appeared to twist his lips. 'Good to meet you too,' he said, and extended his hand once again to shake mine. 'I see you are alone here.'

'Won't be for long,' I wanted to say, but managed to control myself. 'Yes, I just moved from Bangalore.'

'Let's go, Sam,' Nirvi said again.

'Here's my card, hope to see you again soon, buddy.' I said, thrusting my business card in his free hand.

'Sure,' said Samarth, putting the card in his pocket. He did not offer to give me his. But there was something in his voice that hinted that he too was looking forward to meeting me again.

A minute later, the whole team had exited the bar. I too walked out soon after.

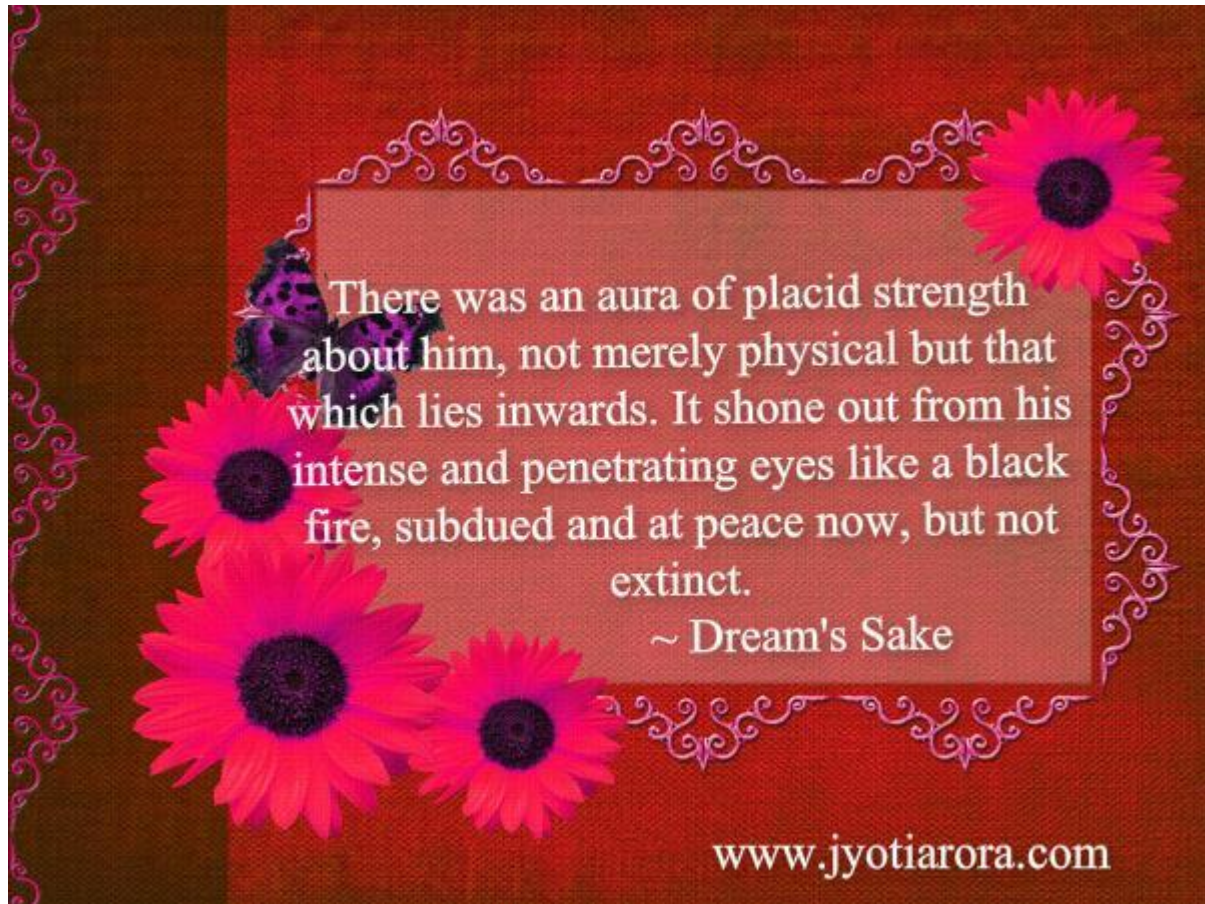
No, I didn't catch any romantic glimpse of Nirvi fading away into the thickening smog of that February evening.

Instead I saw a rectangle piece of white plastic lying on the road. It bore my name and number. At one stroke all my self-congratulations of the successful handling of Sam were erased.

But all was not lost yet. I had extended a hand of friendship to him. And justice demanded I be given that friendship. And whether he liked it or not, I was going to get my dues one way or the other.

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 5

Nirvi:

Sometimes I think it is ridiculous, the extent that people go to secure their homes. What's the use? Even a mouse can bore its way into the most secure mansion.

Just as my brother did. Just as my seventeen boyfriends tried to do before I pushed them down the cliff.

But why did every shove hurt me more than it hurt them? They all regained their footing, I sank lower and lower.

And then my mother found for me a nice guy. Nice guy for a girl she herself had blamed for wanting in all that was nice and decent. Nice guy for a girl who aimed at dating every guy of her acquaintance. Nice guy for a girl whose favourite challenge had been to steal the love of her own best friend.

Well, he indeed was a nice guy. Your Lemon Girl might have found him a dream. But Nirvi didn't. She had no use for nice guys. She had become much too adorned to suit his plain simplicity.

She had no use for marriage either. Marriage meant sacred vows. She had no use for anything sacred. And the sacred would not have wanted her anyway.

She would better use Sam instead. Sam, the best friend of her ex-boyfriend who had once been the boyfriend of her ex-best friend. Yes, she would use Sam instead. He was desperate to be used anyway.

Sam had found Nirvi as she was running away from his best friend's room. In her trembling haste, she had tripped and hurt her ankle, right in front of Sam. Sam had had to help her and take her away to her own room. She had bathed his shoulder with her tears. And he had wiped them off her eyes. She told him what his best friend had tried to do, despite her refusal. He promised to give his friend a lesson in manly duty and to break his friendship with him forever. She wailed that every time she tried finding true love, she failed. He promised then and there that he would never treat her badly and would always be there to love her and protect her and take care of her.

Three weeks had passed away since Sam had won the pride to call Nirvi his girlfriend. Three comfortable and placid weeks. And then, the nice guy appeared and Nirvi decided it was time for Sam to prove true his promise.

She called Sam to report to her in their favourite mall in Gurgaon, two evenings before Ajay, the nice guy, was to come to claim her with a gold ring. Gurgaon was where Sam worked and lived. She too worked in a call centre there. It was a job one of her previous boyfriends had helped her to. It paid enough to let her stay in a PG, away from her home. Home no longer had any use for her. And she had no use for it.

'Are you happy with me, Sam?' she asked him.

'What do you mean?' Sam asked, without halting the game on his phone. 'I asked if you are happy with me or not.'

'Sure,' he said.

'You don't think I am ugly and fat and uneducated?'

'You ugly and fat? No way. But you should have completed your graduation. Why did you not?' he said, looking up as the game on his phone got over.

'I couldn't. It was too boring. But it doesn't matter. I got a job anyway. But do you really think I am good enough for you?'

'Sure.'

Sure was just the right answer. He couldn't have said he still hadn't stopped congratulating himself for getting Nirvi. His friends, and perhaps he himself, had predicted a much bleaker prospect for him.

'Would you miss me very much when I am gone?' Nirvi continued.

'Where are you going?'

'My parents are getting me married.'

'What?'

'Yes, and I will have to do as they say unless...'

'Unless?'

'Unless I run away. But I can't. I can change my PG, but they know where I work. And I can't leave my job. How would I support myself without the job?'

'Why don't you tell your parents about us? I belong to a good and wealthy family. You know my family owns so much land in our village, and I am the only son. And we have so much respect there. And I have good education too and job and...'

'You don't belong to our community. They would never agree.'

'We can get married in a court. Then they will have to agree,' said Sam. 'Of course, my parents would feel hurt if I take such a step. I'm their only son. And I have three sisters.'

'Oh, I don't want to hurt your parents. Never. And I don't want to force myself upon you. I don't want you to rush into marriage, just for my sake. You might regret it later. I don't want to marry you until you are sure that you'd be happy spending your life with me and that your parents would like me too. If only we could spend more time together so we can know each other better. Like maybe live together for some time before marrying. We would know each other better then. But of course, that can't be. Although you live all alone here...'

And 23 hours later, Nirvi had bored her way into Sam's house.

The house demanded a heavy price. It cost Nirvi her job, and her freedom.

But Sam won all the liberties he desired.

And then, you came. And bored your way in too.

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake

Aashi knew that to Raj, she was yet nothing more than a friend of Priyam. But to her, Raj had become a semblance of perfection.

And indeed, he was very near it, according to his out judgement too. Raj was an honest millionaire; at least as honest as a millionaire can be who wants to hold on to his millions. He never told a lie unless it was absolutely necessary to do so and he never, by himself, indulged in flirting. It was Raj's constant endeavour to be a perfect gentleman, and he tried very hard to do good because, basically he believed himself to be good.

~ Dream's Sake

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Chapter 6

Arsh:

Finding her proved to be easier than I had thought. I belong to the 21st century. Technology is my slave. I invoked its services, and hit jackpot. That night, when I sat down to register my presence to my seven hundred and fifty eight friends on Facebook, it took but a tiny bit of search, and a few taps of fingers to increase the number of my friends by one more.

Five evenings after seeing Nirvi at the pub, I was standing at her door.

'Hey, guess whom I have brought with me,' my new friend Tiya sang out as soon as Nirvi opened the door.

Nirvi's smile of welcome for her friend dropped down in an instant. She stared at me, but it was not anger or unwelcome that froze her eyes. Rather a sudden fear, and something very like pain and shame that flamed up and made her squirm. I spied some sudden drops of sweat on her brow. And then she turned and went into her home without even greeting me.

'Tiya, you said all your friends welcome all your friends. But I don't think your friend is happy to see me here,' I said, stepping inside the house nevertheless.

'Oh, she must be tired or something. Don't mind her, she's cool,' said Tiya, shrugging her shoulders and walking straight to the refrigerator.

'She is angry at me,' said Sam. 'I defeated her once again.'

'You and your Playstation. How can anyone spend Sunday evenings playing video games?' said Tiya, shaking her head.

'That's how I spend Sunday mornings too. And don't you say anything against me and my Playstation. We are a perfect team.'

'And what did you do all day?' Tiya turned to her friend.

'She tried to play with me. But she is useless at it. No fun at all. It's too easy to defeat her.'

'But I am trying to learn,' said Nirvi.

'Yes, since the time we started living together. But in the ten months...'

'Seven,' Nirvi corrected him.

'In the seven months, you haven't defeated me even once.'

'I don't think I'd ever be able to do that,' Nirvi said, tilting her head sideways and smiling adoration at Sam, 'You are too good. You are a champion.' Eye lashes were fluttered, the smile was broadened, and a kiss was planted on his cheek.

'Yeah,' he grinned, 'I am the champion.'

That word, somehow, tasted a little bitter to my ears. But then, it didn't much matter. Some people there are who believe they have wings even if they find themselves elevated on an ant hill. They serve very well to make others laugh, but barely matter otherwise.

'Okay, champion, don't forget to greet my new and your old friend,' said Tiya, pulling their attention towards their uninvited and waiting guest.

Sam half got up from the couch and shook hands with me.

'I hope you do not mind my coming here. As you didn't call me...'

'I didn't have your number,' he said.

'What happened to the card I gave you?' I knew the answer very well, of course. But I wanted him to own up.

'Your card didn't like staying in my pocket. It flew away somewhere.'

As Sam said this, I noticed Nirvi turning her back at me and speeding away. She would have done better to stay still instead.

I could pretty well guess now how my card had flown away. What I could not guess at was, why?

Well, there were lot many whys I wanted to find answers for. And I think even she knew I was not going to leave her alone till I was done.

I had to know. I just had to know why a free spirited, bold and frank girl had transformed into something so artificial.

'Can you play?' Sam asked me.

'Yes, I can play,' I said, managing to feign some bit of humility. In my mind I was already celebrating the joy of robbing him of his champion's trophy.

'Good then, you are welcome,' my unsuspecting opponent said. 'Come and let's have a game.'

I nodded and settled down. The battle between Sam and me started. And within ten minutes I realized it was not just a girlfriend he had gained in the last four years. He was not going to be so easy to beat. Not especially when my eyes kept on turning to Nirvi again and again, and my brain tried to decipher a meaning out of her every move.

And she moved often enough, flitting ceaselessly like a butterfly in a glass jar.

Well, though I sat composedly and played with Sam, I was no more at rest than her. She made sure of that.

Though Sam had warned her from disturbing him, she returned every five minutes to him. I was her guest, but she preferred asking him, twice, whether he wanted anything to drink or eat.

'No, just sit still and don't disturb,' was what Sam wanted instead. 'See how I defeat him.'

Nirvi sat down and started watching the game. She managed to be still for full five minutes. And then she had to lean her head on his shoulder, she had to run her fingers through his hair, and she had to cheer him on, though at most inappropriate moments.

When nothing worked, the little patch of sky peeking from the window arrested her attention. And that's what she watched till the game was over.

'There, champion again,' Sam shouted at the end of it.

'And here's a kiss for my champion,' Nirvi said, as if she had been following the game all along.

She leaned towards Sam, crossed her arms around his neck, ending her words with an emphatic kiss. As her lips touched his, her eyes turned to look at me.

I, at that moment, managed to appear attentive to nobody else but Tiya. And so, Nirvi's display could get no response or reaction from me. That seemed to disappoint her somewhat and she got up from the sofa and made as if to go into the kitchen.

I must confess that I probably would not have remained so unaffected by that kiss, had it been a kiss of any genuine emotion. But it pleased me to see that no matter how much Nirvi had changed herself, she was still above feeling any genuine emotion for a fool like Sam. No matter how much and how often Nirvi clung to Sam, love certainly didn't appear to be the glue pulling her to him. And what it was that was binding her to Sam, I had already vowed to find out, as soon as possible.

And to that intent, I soon began my hunt.

'This seems like a nice neighbourhood. It's nearer to my office too than the room I have now. I think I'd shift here. Do you know if any apartment is available for rent?' I asked Sam. I had been thinking of moving anyway, and this locality was as good as any other.

'I guess so. Some or the other is always available. I'll inquire and let you know,' said Sam.

Nirvi had almost reached the kitchen. But my declaration made her stop. She turned, she glared at me, and then she turned again and vanished into the kitchen. Two seconds later a crashing sound from the kitchen told me that a tea cup had been sacrificed to celebrate my expected arrival.

'Do you have a Playstation too?' her helpful boyfriend asked meanwhile. 'We can play at your place when the girls turn too grumpy.'

I suspected, by 'Play' he meant defeating me again and again. He didn't know nothing would make his girl grumpier than having me in the same society. But that was not going to stop me from coming. That, actually, was what was pulling me to her.

So I recited out the list of all the games I had, on my Playstation, and on my laptop, and on my tab, and on my three Smartphones. That guy was all but drooling by the time I ended.

Within ten days of my visit to his house, Sam managed to pull me and my games close to him.

'Welcome to your new home,' Sam said as he dumped the last of my bags on the floor of my apartment. He had been kind enough to help me carry my stuff up to my third floor flat in the tower that faced his own. 'Where are your games?'

I pointed to a box.

I had thought the past few year had given Sam a skill at gaming. But he had not just gained skill, he had gained an addiction. And the person who never bothered to attend a sporting event as a spectator, was now a compulsive gamer. Well, as long as his addiction worked in my favour, I had no problem with it. And if my games could win me his friendship, all the better for me.

'Freshen up quickly. The dinner must be ready,' Sam told me.

'Sure, just give me five minutes,' I said. I wasn't going to take longer because for one, I was starving. Moreover, the dinner was to be at Nirvi's home. Or so I thought.

When I returned from the shower, the first thing I saw was that the promised food had been brought over to my apartment. And Sam had already installed and started up my Playstation.

'Hey, good you are back. I brought the food here. Hurry up now and let's have a match,' he said.

'Match? But it's past ten. If we start playing now, it will be midnight before we know it. Wouldn't Nirvi mind?'

'Yeah, Nirvi gets scared when alone at night. Once, when I returned late from office, I found her screaming in her bed. The TV was on at some music channel. And she was staring at it and screaming as if she had been watching some real ghost, instead of peppy item songs. When I asked her, she said she had fallen asleep and had a bad dream. Silly girl. But anyway, she knows I am here only, so she would be ok. Now hurry up with the dinner. Let's play.'

'Let's play,' I soon found out was Sam's favourite phrase.

As time went by, not one single evening arrived when his 'Let's play' didn't ring in my home. And with every passing evening, his departure time shifted more and more towards the morning.

One day at a time, I somehow stumbled through a whole month of sleeplessness and headaches. And all the reward I got for it was three brief sightings of Nirvi, during each of

which she had behaved most graciously. And yet I was never in doubt that she hated seeing me.

Then, on the first Sunday morning in the month of April, even before my alarm clock had opened its eyes, Sam was again at my door. And I do not lie, nor exaggerate when I say this, but my head started throbbing and my fingers pulsed in protest just at the sight of him. His forgiveness was proving worse than a punishment.

'Hey, dude, still sleeping?' he asked, strolling into the house.

'Yes,' I mumbled, 'I don't wake so early on weekends,' I said. 'And neither does my Playstation,' I wanted to add, but managed to control myself.

'I don't either. But I'm going home today. So had to get up early. I came to inform you we won't be able to play today.'

'Oh? When would you two return?'

'Who two?'

'You and Nirvi?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I am going home. And nobody at home knows I am living with a girl here. My father would hang me upside down with his belt, if they come to know of it.'

Sam meant nothing to me, and Nirvi was just a curiosity I wanted to satisfy. Yet, somehow, Sam's words made me want to challenge him to a match then and there and defeat him hands down in at least ten continuous games. That, despite the fact that just the thought had made my head throb harder and my fingers to shout louder.

'But they would have to know, sooner or later. You love her, don't you?' I said.

'Sure. She's cool,' he shrugged. 'Anyway, I'd be off in an hour.'

'Nirvi would stay alone?' I asked.

'Tiya is to come. I'll be gone for ten days, but Tiya has already planned 15 days of 'girls only' fun with Nirvi.'

That didn't surprise me. I had already seen that no matter what the occasion, Tiya always had more things to do than time could permit. She was always so full of interests and hobbies and good intentions and purposes that she never could have her peace with the limitedness of time. Another thing that I had noticed was that Tiya was the only one who could raise any real smile in Nirvi's eyes. I had no doubt at all that Tiya cared more about Nirvi than Sam did.

'Isn't it a pity I have to go just now?' Sam continued, looking at the games that I had already stopped bothering to put away.

'Yes,' I said, 'I had hoped you'd take me to that furniture shop today.' Since I had stepped out of my parents' home, it was the first time I had a whole apartment to live in, instead of a small room. So I wanted to furnish it nicely, with something better than a cot, a chair and a table, I mean. And since the very first day of my arrival here Sam had been intending to take me to the furniture shop of his acquaintance. The intention hadn't yet come close to materialising into action however.

'Well, Nirvi knows that shop too. But better wait till I'm back. Nirvi is terrible at shopping. She buys the most useless stuff. She has no taste at all.'

'She chose you.' But that seemed to prove his point bang on, at least to me.

'She would have chosen even you had you been at the right place at the right time,' said Sam.

I must admit, Sam had definitely done some good growing up since he passed out of college. The guy had learnt to taunt, and acquired the daring to do so too, even to me. But

then, he was earning more than I was, owned a car and had a gorgeous live-in partner. That, I suppose, was enough to give him the confidence and right to look down upon me.

'You should have seen the long line of jerks she went out with before I brought her here,' he added, in a tone that abundantly praised his unselfish goodness in rescuing the poor girl from the jerks and giving her a kind and generous shelter.

'Okay, got it, she has no taste,' I said, wishing to silence him before, well, before things went out of control.

'Yes, and she can never bargain. The shop keepers always overcharge her,' said Sam. That made me smile.

Here was yet another part of her that she had given up. And yet, I felt happy to know it. Sam had been living with Nirvi since last seven months. But he had no idea who she was.

I knew her better. Yes, I knew her better.

An hour later, I waved Sam off and did not bother to wonder whether I was smiling a bit more than was needed.

As his taxi sped off, my eyes focussed on the one who was busy blowing kisses at the departing vehicle and shouting 'miss-you' and 'love you' in between those kisses. But the unexpected fortunate respite from Sam had put me in a very forgiving mood, so I did not let that lessen my grin.

And then I saw Nirvi's waving hand freeze in the air. Her smile faded in an instant. Her eyes, busy so far in gleaming love, filled up with a sudden dread.

I waited.

After a long moment of stillness, her raised hand curled its fingers and drooped by her side. She turned, and it seemed as if Sam's departing taxi had melted the road under her and weighed her feet with tar.

I was still standing there, waiting for her.

She saw me, ignored me, and sped back towards her home.

I should have returned to my own apartment then. But at that time, somehow, following her seemed more natural. Besides, it was the opportunity I had been looking out for all through the past month.

Together we reached her door which had been left ajar. She took hold of the doorknob. In my mind's eye flashed the picture of her banging the door at me. Instinctively, I stepped back and covered my nose.

'I suppose you want to come in now?' she asked, not allowing her eyes to meet mine.

'I suppose,' I said, 'If you don't mind.'

'You are Sam's friend,' she mumbled, wrenching the door knob almost out of the door.

That didn't mean anything of course, so I let it pass. 'Sam told me Tiya is to come here to give you company. When is she coming?' I said, stepping closer to the door.

'Soon,' she said, walking into her home. She did not close the door behind her. She had realized that this time there was no chance of escape. So she surrendered. And I followed her inside.

We crossed the small corridor that led to the living room. She sat down on a chair, crossing her arms a bit too tightly. I chose the couch in front of her and settled down comfortably. I looked at her and saw no more shrinking in her eyes. Instead, her face and her eyes looked rigid with defiance now. Not the irresistible, amusing defiance of the Lemon Girl, but something grim and...desperate.

She did not speak anything. I too let the second's hand in the clock take full five rotations before I opened my mouth.

'In my home, when a guest comes we serve chilled water,' I said.

She got up like a robot, entered her kitchen and soon returned to bang the glass of water on the table before me.

I picked it up and poured it down my throat. 'Thanks,' I said, wiping my mouth.

'You are welcome,' she replied.

'In my home,' I said again, 'we serve our guests a nice cup of tea too.'

'Sam does not drink tea,' came the answer.

'When tea is not available or the guest does not like it, we serve coffee or cold drinks,' I said.

She got up again. I grinned to spot the very obvious irritation in her robot act.

I feared her breaking another teacup in the kitchen. 'Maybe she would break a whole set now,' I thought.

Well, there was something far more valuable that seemed to be broken in that house. And I would rather she break the teacups, then herself.

But all the teacups remained safe. Even the coffee that was served to me gave no indication of any mischief.

'Thanks, nice coffee,' I said, after taking a couple of sips.

She spread out her lips in a gracious smile. But as she said nothing, I once again had to start the conversation. 'Why do you think I'm just Sam's friend? We two know each other from earlier too, don't we?' I said.

'You call fighting on a street knowing each other?' she said.

'So you do remember.'

'Yes, I remember. I remember every moment of...that day.'

Had I been listening with only half an ear, I would still have caught the unmistakable alteration in her voice when she spat out the last two words. Had I been looking at her with only half closed eyes, I would still have seen the shafts of pain and hatred that pierced her eyes. But my attention was focussed only on her and I missed neither the tremor of her voice, nor the sudden descending of moisture in her eyes.

'That day... that day,' my mind repeated the words. Did something happen to her on the day I first met her? Must have been something painful. Then I must always remind her of that. 'No wonder she hates seeing me,' the thought cracked out, illuminating much in its blaze.

I don't know how long a time passed away in silence after that. Maybe many minutes, maybe only an instant. But finally I managed to push my thoughts away and reply, 'I don't remember much of that day,' I said. 'But I remember someone whom I nicknamed Lemon Girl. She was a most extraordinary girl, you know. I wish I could meet her again.'

Her eyes flicked up and looked into mine, straight and unwavering. 'But I don't,' she said. 'She was ugly and foolish. She had no manners, never knew how to behave properly. Even her mother thought so.'

'No, she wasn't. She was...' I began a protest.

Just then, a merry singsong voice announced the entry of another visitor in the house. Not a glance passed between Nirvi and me, but we both knew that the past was to be dropped at once and the present met with an unaffected grin.

'Hey, where are you, Nirvi? Why is the door open?' Tiya's voice entered the living room before she herself skipped in.

I at once realized that I had forgotten to close the door as I had followed Nirvi in. 'My fault,' I called back. 'But don't worry Nirvi is not alone.'

'Hey, Arsh, nice to see you. How are you?' chimed Tiya stepping inside the room.

I gave the required response and reciprocated by asking the required questions. Tiya let the pleasantries continue for five minutes. And then, 'So anyway,' she said, 'how long are you going to give the pleasure of your company to us girls?' she asked, tilting her head sideways and raising one eyebrow.

I well remembered what Sam had said about Tiya's 'girls only' plans. She clearly couldn't wait to start up on them. Well, but I have my own mind, and my own mind likes making its own plans. And I don't like putting them on hold either.

'How long can you bear me?' I asked grinning, settling deeper into the couch and spreading my arms on its back.

'Hmm,' Tiya mumbled, shifting her pupils left and right as she did her calculations. 'You have permission to linger till lunch. After that we girls have to go shopping,' she declared.

'So kind of you for letting me stay this long,' I said. 'I need another favour from you.'

'What?' asked Tiya.

'I need furniture and some household stuff. Sam had promised to help me, but he hasn't yet. And I don't yet know the markets here all that well. Can you help?'

Tiya screwed her eyes and twitched her lips and pretended to be thinking hard and calculating a bunch of options.

'Just tell me where to find the best furniture shops, offering good price,' I said.

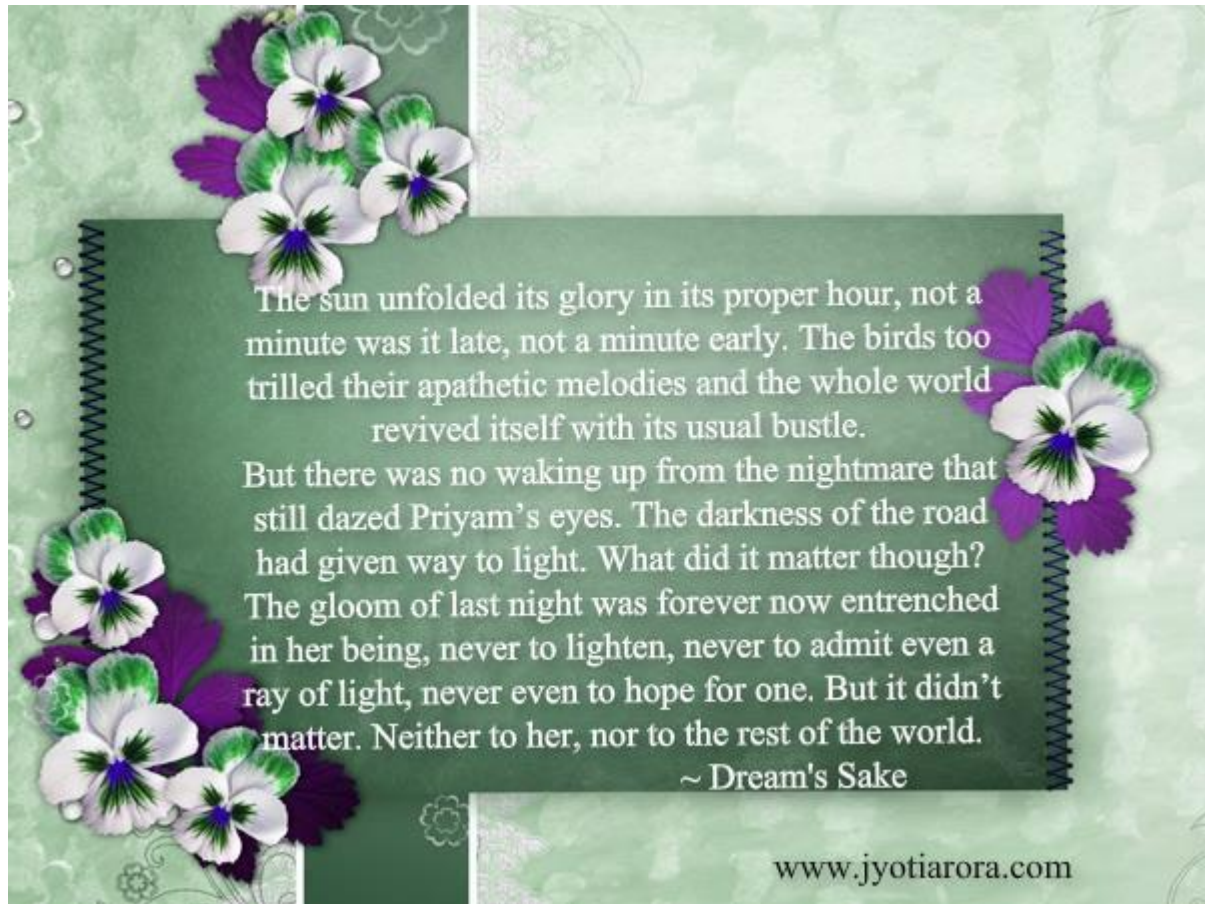
Another round of rapid calculations followed, made visible by some more dancing of her pretty eyes.

'I have a better idea. We are going that way anyway, so we'll take you there and help you shop. Okay?' she asked finally, extending her hand to me as if to confirm a deal.

I took it in mine and managed to hold on to it for at least two full moments longer than was needed.

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 7

Arsh:

A mistake is an opportunity you give to life to teach you a lesson. And when even human teachers don't give lessons for free, Life certainly won't. It often demands much too high a price. Even if the lesson is just that you are a big fool.

And that is what I learnt about myself, when I took the two pretty ladies shopping. Or rather, they took me along.

'Okay, Arsh, let's take you shopping,' said Tiya, as we walked up to Sam's car.

Nirvi stepped up to the driver's side.

'Oh, no, no way. No way I'm going to let you drive,' said Tiya.

'But you don't have a licence,' said Nirvi, discounting me from the available options list.

'I would much rather risk an arrest than to let you sit behind the wheel. You know, Arsh, she drives so rashly, she almost killed herself twice,' said Tiya.

'But now you are with me. I won't drive rashly,' said Nirvi, smiling at her friend.

I smiled too seeing Nirvi so relaxed and calm. Tiya always calmed her, I knew. But it pleased me better to think it the effect of Sam's absence, and a getting used to of my presence.

'No, no, and no. I'll drive. Please let me drive. I haven't driven a car in ages,' said Tiya, pulling out the car key from Nirvi's grasp.

'You don't have a car?' I asked.

'I wish. But you see, I am the only child of my parents. My life is precious. And my parents don't think I have become old enough yet to be considered responsible for something so precious, especially with regards to things as dangerous as driving a car. But don't worry, I know how to drive. So come on,' and she settled herself behind the steering wheel of the car. Nirvi jumped in beside her, leaving me to sit coily in the back seat.

'Just show me where I can get good furniture, then I'll let you two go for your own shopping and not interfere in your fun,' I said.

'We don't want you to interfere either. That's why we have shifted our shopping to tomorrow. Today, we'll help the shopkeepers raid your pocket,' said Tiya.

And believe it or not, that is exactly what the two did.

I was taken to a fancy mall. And I was pushed into even a more fancy furniture store. And then started their help.

And amid lots of 'Ooohs,' and 'Aahs,' by both of them, and 'This is so lovely, you must buy it,' and 'I love it, you must buy it,' and 'that one is cheaper but this one is perfect,' by Tiya, and a ready seconding of Tiya's every choice by Nirvi and the abundant display of nothing less than the best and most expensive by the sales man, and by none of them paying any attention to my 'I don't need it,' and 'It is too big for my room,' and 'It is too expensive,' and 'Have mercy,' and 'For God's Sake no, not that,' I ended up buying stuff I didn't need, at prices I couldn't afford.

Okay, I might still have managed to hold my ground. But what to do? Tiya was smiling, and I could see a glimmer of fun in my Lemon Girl's eyes. The laughter in her eyes was genuine. And for once, I did not mind seeing anyone laugh at my expense. And it was good too to hear her say what she liked, instead of what Sam liked.

Nirvi is quite artistic in her tastes. I saw that clearly enough when they forced me into the store selling interior decoration items and paintings. Artistic sculptures, handicraft items

and paintings attracted her especially. She touched them with her fingers, praised them with her eyes, and then moved resolutely away.

And then there was that painting that pulled a gasp from her lips and made her ignore everything else.

It showed a path through a wood bathed in moonlight. The whole scene was painted in various shades of darkish blue. Only the narrow path was in white, and the moon, and the face of the girl or the fairy who stared down it. She stood leaning against a leafless tree. Or maybe she was trapped, with her wings caught in its scraggly branches. Something like that. I didn't look too closely. It all appeared too blue to me.

But Nirvi loved it.

'How beautiful,' she murmured, her eyes full of piety as they gazed at it. 'Isn't it, Tiya?' 'Yes, it is lovely, but I'm sure you can paint a better one,' said Tiya.

'You are an artist?' I asked.

'No, I'm not,' said Nirvi.

'Yes, she is, a superb one. Two months ago she did a portrait of me and I tell you it looks gorgeous. Hey, can you paint a picture by seeing a photograph? I was thinking a portrait would be a great birthday gift...' Tiya said.

'For whom?' I asked, with not really a very innocent curiosity.

'For my brother, cousin brother,' replied Tiya.

Nirvi stumbled back from her as if Tiya had slapped her, slapped her hard, with her words.

'Hey, what happened?' Tiya called out.

Nirvi shook her head but started moving away backwards, her face looking as if an ant had bitten her toe with poison tipped teeth. 'Nothing, let's go back. I'm tired,' said she, still continuing her retreat.

'But what about this painting? Don't you want to buy it? It would look great in your room,' said Tiya, rushing after her friend.

That managed to halt Nirvi's steps. She turned and once again gazed at the painting.

'It's lovely,' she murmured.

'Let's buy it,' said Tiya.

'Sam would not like it.'

'But you like it and...' I began.

'Doesn't matter,' she cut me short. And then she turned and walked out of the store.

I shrugged my shoulders and followed her.

'I'll just be a minute,' Tiya called out to me and lingered behind.

As Nirvi stepped out of the store, she sort of transformed. It was as if something had turned something on in her.

Her walk, careless till now, became measured and swinging. Her eyes flitted around catching stares, and she repeatedly turned her head with jerky motions to fling her hair this way and that, then to run her well adorned fingers through them and to count the eyes that had followed the motion.

Many did, including mine, as I caught up with her.

She had done nothing new, but still, somehow, she looked more glamorous now than she did a minute ago. Her brows looked more arched, her lips more pouted, her skirt looked shorter and her eyes had dressed themselves up in a different clothing altogether.

Something had palled over them, it was dark and ominous, but adorned with a beckoning glitter. It seemed to uncover her in a way, to make her available, ready to be taken by whosoever desired.

And I knew that at that moment at least, the desire that pulled me to her was not a mere curiosity.

I walked on beside her in silence. My steps followed the rhythm of her feet. She was not walking fast, but I still felt a little breathless.

She touched her leg, as if to brush something off. But she failed to brush my gaze off them. She turned a little sideways, towards me and adjusted her T-shirt, and I noticed that there was a little butterfly painted on it. The butterfly had chosen a fine place to rest its blue and yellow wings. Those wings were still, but somehow they managed to raise a flutter in me. Nirvi adjusted her shirt again, pulling it a little lower. The butterfly slid a little lower too.

Ripples of chilled flames shot up in me. I clenched my fists, stowed them deep in my pockets and cursed Sam for existing, cursed him even more for becoming my friend.

And Nirvi strutted on.

Nirvi and I had stepped out of the mall. At a little distance stood two bikes. On those two bikes sat three guys. It took less than two seconds for one girl to force all their six eyes to become focussed on only her.

And then she tripped, uttered a low cry, and fell down on the road, right in front of them.

I can't say that she did it purposely, because as her steps led her towards them, her eyes seemed to be looking at everything except where she was heading to.

So, it might even have been a genuine fall.

I was just two steps behind her. But before I could reach her, other pairs of hands had crowded up on her. They pulled her up to her feet, they supported her. And laid claim on parts of her in the process. She staggered a little under their weight, they pressed harder, closer.

The dusk had almost spent itself, and Nirvi had fallen down where the deepest shadows lay. Yet there was light enough to show me where the hands lay on her, and where they were moving to.

'Nirvi!' that was my voice that shouted the name. And it sounded angry.

'Hey, Arsh, don't worry, I'm alright. I just tripped,' she said. Her voice sounded husky, as if she was drunk. Maybe she was, on something far bitter and inescapable than wine. And then she smiled. As the hands slipped upwards and downwards, she smiled.

And I did not know whether I wanted to shout at her, drag her away, or drag myself away and never look at her again. I did neither. I just stared. Something flicked up in me, and raged through me like molten iron and pins. Yet it was she who was turning into ashes. I just stood, and stared.

Her smile passed into a low, inviting laugh.

I still stared.

I saw the group inching closer to their bikes. Nirvi was moving along with them, towards the bikes.

I knew I had to call her. But at that moment, her name sounded too disgusting to be uttered. And there was no way I was going to stain my Lemon Girl by calling her that.

And the hands groped on.

Her laugh rang no more. Her smile came and went, like a flickering flame unsure of the next moment of its light, yet bent on burning till the last.

One hand slid lower and lower. I saw her stiffening. It stopped, having found its destination. She stilled. I saw her wince.

That was all I could take. I had to pull her away, whether she liked it or not.

I raged up to the group. 'Come back,' I called to her, rather, growled to her, I think.

A tumult went through her waning flame. It trembled up, as if under a blast of wind.

'I...I must go, I must go,' I heard her.

'Leave her alone, she is with me,' I said, stretching out to grasp her arm in mine.

I think I charged at them like a raging bull. Though I had no intention of becoming her hero. Sam was her hero, and just the thought of being like Sam was repulsive to me. But still, I was going to save a girl from three goons. It was heroic, admit it or not. And I already felt proud of myself. That is, till a fist came, took the light out of my left eye, temporarily, and made me eat dust.

It was a mighty fist, I must admit. Any other guy might have fainted under it. But I am too strong to go fainting like that. I would have jumped back on my feet immediately. But while falling, I had also tripped on a loose stone. And my ankle was sprained. Sprains can happen to even the mightiest guys. Wrestlers and other sports guys get sprains too. So it was no big deal.

Only, as I lay there, it was not very pleasant to see them laughing at me. And the handful of loiterers that had gathered around laughed too. I looked at them and knew it was useless to expect any help from them. They were there to watch the show. And I could see a couple of them even putting the camera of their mobiles to use.

And meanwhile, the three goons were once again moving away, with her.

Her flame seemed to have breathed its last. She was quiet. Her eyes stared at me blankly. There was nothing left in them anymore. She was gone. And they were taking her body away.

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 8

Nirvi:

There were hands on me. And I knew it was my own fault.

They clawed and pressed and burned to tear me out. And I knew it was my own fault. They were pulling at me, leading me away.

Away was the only direction I had been taking anyway. And nobody had called me back yet.

But you did. 'Come back!' you ordered.

But back to where, Arsh? You had no idea where I had come from, and what lay at the back.

And they hit you and you fell down. All my fault, I knew that well too.

'Arsh? What happened?' Tiya cried, as she came running with a painting in her hand.

You looked at me. And she looked at me. 'Nirvi!' she cried. The painting she had bought for me dropped beside you and that mad girl ran straight to me.

'Leave her. Leave her. How dare you?' she cried, hitting them and pushing them away from me.

Two hands slipped away from me, and towards her.

'How dare you? How dare you?' she slapped them, pushing them away.

I saw them touch her. How dare they? It was not her fault. She was not at blame. How dare they touch her!

I pushed the hands away from her. 'Not her. Not her,' the cry pounded in my head and raged through my veins. 'It was not her fault.'

What had I done? What had I gotten Tiya into? All my fault.

He was pulling Tiya towards his bike. 'No. Don't you dare,' I cried. He laughed. And pulled her harder.

And then something happened. I knew not what I was doing. But I must have done something right. And I must have done it strongly enough.

All I remember is that the two motorbikes started and raced away. And I had a bruised hand and tingling palms. One of my stilettos was in my hand, its heel broken. I was panting, strands of my hair clinging to my face.

And there was a loud clapping and cheering echoing from the people standing around. They had thoroughly enjoyed the show, even if they hadn't bothered to participate.

I looked at Tiya. She was clutching her stomach and shaking with laughter. Good. It had not been her fault. She had a right to laugh as she wanted.

And there you were, still on the ground, reclining on your elbow and staring at me and smiling.

'Oh, Nirvi. You were awesome. How did you do it? Where did you learn such fighting? At first I was so scared. I thought we are done for. But the way you went at them! You were awesome. And it was so funny. How they tried to save themselves from you! You were awesome,' Tiya laughed out, clapping and jumping and hugging me again and again. 'She was awesome, wasn't she, Arsh? Just like a whirlwind, wasn't she?'

A whirlwind carries a lot of debris in it. And leaves much behind, broken doors, broken walls, broken houses. It can break open a prison too and let the swarm of prisoners gallop out, if only to die.

Tiya couldn't stop laughing. I saw her, and I started laughing too. The roaring bellows just spurted out by themselves. They surprised Tiya. They surprised me too. I had heard them for the first time in this life.

But Tiya had never heard them at all. She had never known me laugh like that. Her surprise made me laugh even more. I tried to control myself, but couldn't. I did not know what I was laughing at. But I was laughing, and I couldn't help it. I just couldn't help it.

You tried to get up, but stumbled back again. And that made me laugh too.

'It took just one punch to put you down, huh, Arsh?' I asked.

'Nothing like that. He didn't even know how to throw a good punch. But I tripped and sprained my leg,' you said.

'Oh, your leg is sprained too? How good for you, Arsh,' I said, between my laughs. 'You can now claim you saved us. You have injuries enough to prove it. And we won't give your secret away, would we, Tiya?'

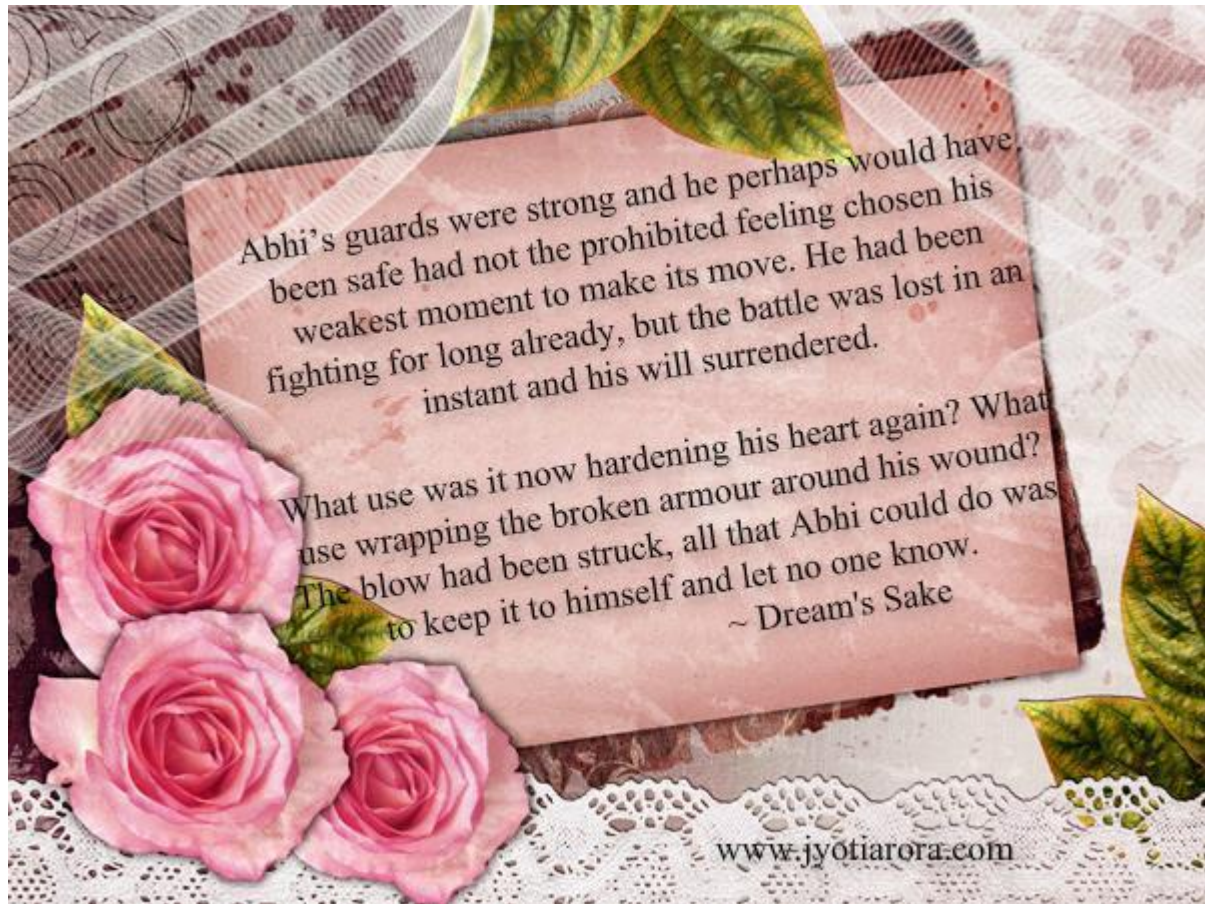
Tiya shook her head, arresting her mirth behind her pursed lips and trying to look sympathetic as she and I tried to help you up.

You looked angry and scowled at me. And I hollered again. And Tiya burst out laughing to hear me laugh. And you couldn't scowl for long either after that. You too laughed, despite your blue eye and sprained leg.

And as you leaned on me, you turned, brought your lips close to my ear and whispered, 'Glad to meet you again, Lemon Girl.'

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 9

Arsh:

It isn't easy to feel heroic when you hobble into your room aided by two girls. But it is not very unpleasant either, even if you are leaning on their shoulders for support, and still groaning with every step you take.

Well, it had been a very expensive evening, for me at least. My wallet had been emptied, and my leg had been broken, or very nearly so. And yet, it had been rewarding as well. Just when I had given up on Nirvi and thought her completely lost, the Lemon Girl had materialized and in one fiery whirlwind of rage rescued Nirvi and Tiya.

And it had been a sight worth seeing, the way she fought. Although, try as I might, even that scene could not rub out the one I had seen before it. The way Nirvi had thrown herself in the hands of those scoundrels. How could she behave in such a way? Tiya would never have done it. In fact, I was sure that none of the girls I had ever known would have done a thing like that. Although some of them were quite modern and free thinking. My own sisters are quite modern too. But they would never even talk to a girl who had such hobbies.

'Is she like that? My Lemon Girl? I wondered. 'She isn't, she can't be, such a girl to seek such attentions just for fun,' I told myself again and again. But another voice in my heart warned that I really couldn't be so sure about Nirvi. After all, I barely knew her. 'But she was behaving well enough till then,' I countered that voice. 'Then something happened. But what?' I wondered. 'What caused her to change all of a sudden?'

That was again the very same question I had been trying to find the answer for. That day, I felt like forcing Nirvi to sit before me and answer to a direct interrogation. But I already knew that it would be useless trying to get anything out of her against her wish.

However, she had become quiet, if not calm, as we returned to our homes. She responded to our banter in the merest possible words. And as soon as I was dropped off at my home, she dragged her friend away with the urgency of one wishing to escape from a pestilence stricken air. Well, she may think whatever about me, but I knew for sure her friend did not quite share in her dislike of my nearness. And that was enough for me.

I had my fill of the pizza I had brought, raced through all the channels on the TV for an hour and then hobbled over to my bed.

I had a very pleasant sleep that night. Whether it was because of the effect of the day's exhaustion or the painkiller I had taken or the afterglow of the company I had enjoyed that day, I don't care. I just know that I had a very pleasant sleep and when I woke up, it was to a pleasant surprise as well.

It wasn't my alarm clock, but the door bell that woke me up the next day. The face of Tiya glimmered up before me. How worried she was about my injury. She must have come to check on me. I jumped out of bed, and then fell back on it again as my injury shouted out its protest. Slow was going to be the order of the day. So I slowly put my feet down again, slowly put my weight back on them, and slowly hobbled over to the door.

'Hey, Ti...Nirvi, what are you doing here so early?' I said, since it wasn't Tiya standing and smiling at my door, but Nirvi holding a lunchbox and staring at it as if moving her eyes away might cause it to topple down.

'Tiya has gone away. But she made me promise I'd check on you and see you are okay. And she made breakfast for you,' she rattled off in one breath, extending the lunchbox towards me. I refused to take it. Instead, I turned and walked inside, leaving the door ajar.

She had to follow. 'And it is not very early I suppose since it's already past eight,' answered Nirvi, coming in. 'At what time do you leave for office?' She had yet not looked at me for even one moment.

'I'm not going to the office today. But why has Tiya gone away? Sam said she will stay with you while he is away. And wow, how charming of you to let your guest make breakfast for your injured neighbour while you go on snoozing.'

That brought up a smile on her face and she relaxed a little. Her eyes flicked up at me for a instant, then shrank back again.

'Thanks, I always try my best to be charming,' she said, putting the lunch box on the table. 'I know you do,' I said. And I had always hated it, especially when she showed her fawning charm and mindless obedience to more mindless Sam. She often became like a robot, obeying his orders at a word, without a thought, and often it seemed without any expenditure of emotion either.

'But why has Tiya gone away?'

'She will be back by evening. When she promised to stay with me, she forgot she had also promised her cousin to teach her dance for a competition at school. Tiya's cousin kept on expecting her yesterday, but Tiya forgot.'

'Maybe she didn't forget. Maybe she didn't want to go. Who would want to waste whole afternoon teaching dance to a silly school kid?'

'Tiya would. She loves dance and dreams of becoming a choreographer, or to have her own dancing classes,' said Nirvi, easing up a little more and looking around the room as she spoke.

'Nice,' I said. 'What do you dream about? Tiya told me you are a fantastic artist. Do you...'

'I don't dream about anything. Finish your breakfast. I have work to do at home,' came the response. And the door that had been opening a little was banged shut.

I freshened up quickly and then settled down to breakfast.

'I like tea with my breakfast,' I politely hinted as I picked up a sandwich.

Nirvi got up and went into my kitchen. 'There's not even one clean cup here,' she called out.

I was too busy munching on the sandwich to respond. And five minutes later, hot tea was served before me in a newly washed cup.

'Have you had breakfast?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. Her eyes said something else.

Tiya and Nirvi were to have pizzas too on the previous night, as per Tiya's plan. Tiya would have forced Nirvi to have at least one morsel more than Nirvi's self-restricted ration. So it was compensation time now most likely, till Tiya came to force food down her throat once again. Tiya had told me enough about Nirvi's eating routine. Becoming fat was Nirvi's mortal fear and she did all she could to avoid it.

'If I don't keep forcing Nirvi to eat, I tell you, she would vanish before two months are over,' was what Tiya had told me when we were ordering pizza and turning a deaf year to Nirvi's plea against it on the previous night.

Well, what Tiya could do, I could do too.

'Yuk, this sandwich tastes funny,' I said.

'It's just a cheese sandwich,' Nirvi said.

'Taste it, there's definitely something wrong with it,' I insisted.

She broke a little bit off the sandwich and put it into her mouth as if there really was poison in it.

'It's fine,' she said. Her face showed she had found it better than fine.

'No, it isn't. Take a bigger bite and you'd know,' I said, breaking a big portion and putting it in her hand.

'No, I can't. I have already eaten and...' she protested, but meekly, as Lemon Girl's eyes peeked out from hers and became glued to that piece of bread.

'Come on, it's just a little piece. It won't make you fat,' I said.

'No, I have eaten...' she said again.

'Okay, then you can take this breakfast away. I am not going to eat either. And I'd tell Tiya I starved all day because of you,' I said.

She accepted the poison and put it into her mouth. 'But Tiya made this for you only,' she said.

'So nice of Tiya. How do you manage to make your guest cook for you? I'm sure my mother would like to know,' I said.

A smile appeared on Nirvi's face again and was reflected in her eyes as well. 'She should choose her guests well. She should only have guests who love to cook.'

'Wow, Tiya loves to cook too?' I was impressed, even more, that is.

'Yes, she dreams of becoming a chef one day, at her own restaurant, besides being a choreographer. She also plans to write cookery books. Her father too has written books you know, on yoga. Tiya also already has a blog dedicated to food. It has only two posts yet but she plans to start being regular at it very soon.'

I handed Nirvi a sandwich. She took it without a word this time and held it in her hand.

'Tiya loves food. And she is so lucky too,' she said. 'She can eat cheese and butter for breakfast, lunch and dinner and still not get fat.'

'Don't worry, one sandwich won't make you fat either. So eat,' I said. And she ate.

'I too plan to become a professional blogger,' I told Nirvi. 'A tech. blogger. Tech. blogging is being quite a big thing these days.'

'What is the name of your blog?' she asked. Her eyes focussed on me with interest. She looked more at ease too.

'I haven't started it yet. I want to, but can't find the time.'

'Time is right here already, you only need to find a right schedule,' she said smiling.

So, she had decided to be all preachy and wise now. Well, preaching was one thing I could never tolerate, too bad.

'It's not so easy when you are in a job and have a boss whose purpose in life is to prepare you for hell. You are lucky you never had to be a slave in a full time job,' I said.

She became silent and looked away.

I picked up the tea cup and started sipping it. It was quite good.

'I...' came her voice, 'too...had a job once,' she said, 'at a call centre.'

'Oh, okay,' I said.

A smile twisted out on her face, and then followed the flow of words. 'One of my boyfriends had helped me to it. I got rid of him soon after, but decided to keep the job.' Another smile, and her eyes looked up and bored into mine.

I was stuck, not by her words, but by the tone in which they were spoken. Totally blank. Totally emotionless. She had good practice at hiding her feelings.

I think I managed pretty well in showing no emotion at all too. I accepted her words as a common fact and asked, 'Why did you leave that job?'

'I found myself another boyfriend and moved in with him.'

'Sam?'

'Yes, my darling Sam.'

'But you had no need to leave your job for that....,' fool was what I wanted to say, but refrained. There was no telling how she would have reacted. And I wanted to keep her in the mood she was in. At least she was talking to me, really talking, I mean, for the first time. And that felt as satisfying as the delicious breakfast Tiya had prepared for me. Maybe even more.

'How dirty your room is. Have you never cleaned it since you moved here?' Nirvi asked, ignoring my words. She got up and picked up last night's pizza carton from the floor.

'I would have cleaned,' I said when she returned after putting the carton in the dustbin. She looked around and picked up a CD from a chair. 'That CD would go into that cover. And put it into that drawer.' I said.

She did it.

'And pick up those headphones and my iPod from the chair too and put them....,' I began my second order to the robot.

But the robot was not programmed to slave for me.

She became still for an instant. Then she turned, folded her arms and fixed her eyes on me. 'Just because I brought breakfast for you, it doesn't mean I'll clean your home too and follow all your orders.'

'Why? You follow Sam's all orders. Whether they are right or wrong, you never ever speak a word.'

'You are not Sam,' she said, 'and I am not Nirvi to you, am I?'

I smiled.

'I don't mind Nirvi but...' I began.

'You don't mind Nirvi?' she interrupted me.

'No, I only mind how she keeps the Lemon Girl in her hidden and locked away.'

'Nirvi is not a good girl,' she said, glinting a smile at me.

'Who says so?'

'Your Lemon Girl.'

'Of course, since you keep her locked away.' I had no idea where the conversation was going. But I decided to play along.

'Your Lemon Girl wasn't pretty.'

'Yet she was the most remarkable girl I had ever seen,' I said, looking straight into her eyes. 'And she was real.'

Nirvi stared back at me for a long moment. Then she walked over to the table, collected her lunchbox and was gone the next instant. And I seriously wondered whether I would get the chance to lay my eyes on her ever again.

Nirvi came again, and that very same day. Once again she held a lunchbox in her hands. I took it from her hands at the door, but she followed me in anyway.

She did not smile, nor responded to my greeting. She looked a little lost. And in her manners was the same hesitation that I had seen when she had succumbed to the lure of the cheese sandwich in the morning.

'What have you brought for me?' I asked.

'Nothing special,' she said.

'I could have made that myself. I was going to, in five minutes,' I replied.

'Just like you were going to clean this room, I'm sure,' she said, rolling her eyes at the room that had somehow become more 'decorated' since her morning visit.

'Did Tiya cook this too?' I asked.

'No,' Nirvi replied. She walked over to the table and started clearing it and putting stuff away to where they were supposed to be put away. She worked quickly and expertly, without wasting time in displaying any of Nirvi's delicacies and graces. And she wasn't following any orders either. I took care not to give her any. In five minutes, the table had been cleaned and the lunch was laid out for me. Only one plate was there.

'Where's your plate?' I asked.

'I have eaten,' came the answer again.

'No use lying to me. Bring another plate or take this one away too.'

'But...'

'I'm really hungry,' I said.

She stomped her way to the kitchen, stomped her way back, bumped herself down on the chair and looked as if she was about to meet devastation. But she let the devastation overtake her. She ate.

Much the same routine continued for two more days. Tiya spent her days with her cousin. Nirvi brought food for me, and I forced her to eat it. She never failed in making most marvellous grimaces while swallowing the poison, and yet, merciless as I am, I always managed to force it down her throat anyway.

Those three days eased off two of my nagging pains. One, my sprained leg got better. And two, I no longer saw in Nirvi's eyes the painful urgency to hide herself from me. If it calmed her, it gave me a nice and pleasant sense of relief as well. Those three days had made her used to me and her eyes no longer seemed to consider me a torture for their sight.

By fourth day of my rest at home, my leg had become well enough to carry me to my office. But then, I was sure the office would survive quite well yet another day of my absence. And so I had found no compulsion to discontinue the rest treatment of my injured limb.

All had gone well at breakfast time. Remarkably well, as a matter of fact, because one of my joke had made Nirvi forget her new acquired laugh and she had allowed herself to approve that joke with her own, original and full hearted laughter.

By the time she arrived with my lunch, I had already searched through the internet and filled up my brain with several more jokes.

When she arrived, however, I happened to be browsing through the Facebook. And that's what I continued to do while she cleared the table and brought in the plates and spoons.

'What is your ID? I can't find you,' I asked her. 'I found Tiya and Sam, but can't find you even in their friendlist,' I said.

'I'm not on Facebook.'

'Don't lie. I'll find your ID sooner or later, you know.' 'No, really. I deleted my account.'

Just as she had deleted her job, her family, her whole past. But why? What lurked in the abyss of past that she was so desperate to escape? Well, I would find that out too, sooner or later.

'Let's create a new one for you then,' I said.

'I don't need it.'

'You are going to have it nevertheless. Now come and sit here,' I said, settling down on the couch with my laptop.

'I won't use it.'

'Come on, it would be fun. Besides, I'm getting bored. So let's do it.'

'If you are free, then why not create that blog of yours? You have a dream. You also have a chance to make it come true. Why are you pushing it away like that by wasting time?'

'I would work on it, but first let's get you back on Facebook. Why don't you want to be on it anyway?'

'No reason,' she said, and settled down beside me on the couch.

The profile was soon made. I gave myself the honour of being her first friend. Then I added Tiya. The remaining additions I left for Nirvi to make, when she will.

It's been so many months since. But she has not made any addition yet.

Well, little by little, Nirvi moved closer to peep into my laptop the more clearly. We moved to Tiya's profile and browsed through her pictures. Nirvi had many stories to tell about those pictures. And she did tell them, laughing often, with real lemony delight brightening her eyes. Tiya loved Facebook and she had shared enough on it to let us last a whole hour.

'Tiya loves taking pictures of herself, doesn't she?' I asked.

'She loves herself,' said Nirvi, smiling.

'She is awesome. But how come she is still single?' as was declared by Tiya's relationship status on Facebook.

'Oh, maybe because she is too busy deciding her career. She has no time to choose a boyfriend. She likes doing so many things that she can't decide what she wants to do most. I tell her that if she does not hurry, she would end up being a teacher in her father's school, just as her parents want.'

'Her father has a school?'

'Two. Primary schools. And he helps other people establish schools too, as a consultant.'

'But still, she should have a boyfriend.' And I was ready to offer myself for that post.

'Well, I know that at least three of her friends are very hopeful of becoming that,' said Nirvi. 'She likes them all, calls them her best boy buddies, but none of them has yet managed to win her preference.'

So, there was hope for me. Good. And I had a good chance too. Tiya had already made breakfast for me.

I might have spent a long and leisurely hour dreaming about gaining Tiya's preference, but Nirvi's presence interfered.

'Show me your photos now,' she asked.

'Sure,' I said, and opened up my albums for her pleasure. This time, it was my turn to tell the stories. And I think she enjoyed them as much as I had enjoyed hers, though several of mine were totally fake.

'And this is my family,' I said, showing her a picture taken on a Diwali. It showed my two sisters standing with my parents outside our home.

'Your sisters are pretty,' she said.

I smiled.

'And who is this guy?' she asked, pointing to the dude who could also be seen in that picture, at some distance towards the right.

'He's our neighbour. Very intelligent guy. A doctor, and studying still to acquire some greater degree,' I said.

'He's your younger sister's boyfriend, isn't he?'

'Of course not. What makes you think that?' Sisters are not supposed to have boyfriends, you know.

'I think he is. And your sister is in love with him. See the way she is looking at him. I tell you, he just has to give a word and she will do anything for him.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, in a tone that should have silenced her. But it didn't.

'Oh? Don't you know the meaning of anything?' she said, raising up her eyebrow and irritating me even more with her fake laugh.

'How dare you? How dare you say that about my sister?' I burst out. '*You* have no right to. She is a decent, cultured and very good girl. Both my sisters are. They don't go about making boyfriends. And even if he is her boyfriend, my sister would never...'

I don't know what else I might have added. But I forgot all words when my eyes turned to Nirvi.

She looked as if a thunderbolt had struck her. Her eyes stared at me wide, her mouth was half open, and she had turned pale in an instant.

'Yes,' she said. I could hear the tremor in her voice as clearly as her words. 'I have no right.'

She got up from the couch. She was trembling. 'I have no right,' she repeated.

Before I could grasp what was happening, she was gone.

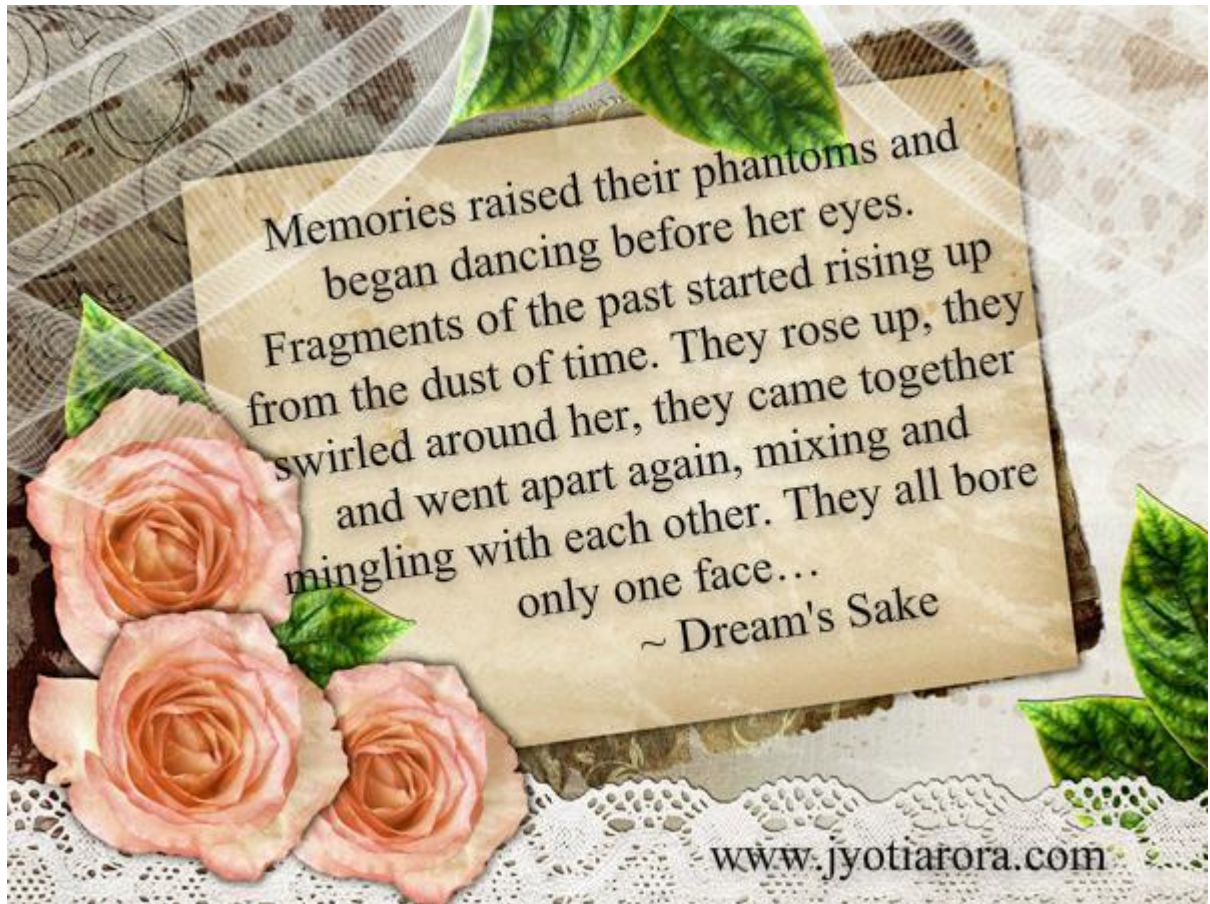
'Damn,' was all that I could think of saying.

I had no idea what had happened. I knew what I had said. But I had no idea what she had heard in those words. It was clearly not what I had meant.

'Damn.'

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 10

Arsh:

Words don't generally fail me. But there are some words that my tongue has a strange antipathy to. And no matter how hard I try, it refuses to utter them. Or pronounces them with such a fine grace that it may often seem that they were better left unsaid. Sorry, for example, is one such word. And no matter how loud it rings in my heart, you will never hear it in my voice. Not readily, at least.

But a sorry seemed definitely needed that day. The memory of Nirvi's stark white face demanded it. Her rushing away in shame demanded it. My own words, when I forced myself to decipher their every meaning, demanded it. And all these kept on raising a clamour that stayed with me till I went to sleep, and rang louder still till I got up, without having slept much.

But it hadn't really been my fault. She shouldn't have said such things about my sister. And I hadn't really meant anything. She should have understood that. So sorry wasn't needed, maybe. I just had to make sure she understood things as they were.

It was quarter to seven when I knocked at her door.

She took a minute to open it. And seemed to shrink into herself when her eyes realized who the visitor was.

'Hey, what took you so long? Sleeping till so late, lazyhead?' Wrong beginning, I know. 'I wasn't sleeping,' she said.

'I haven't slept all night,' might perhaps have been more apt, going by the redness of her eyes.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'I'm fine,' she said, looking straight at me. 'And I'm so sorry for yesterday. I shouldn't have said such things.'

How simple was that. How easily she had apologised. And there I was, still standing like a dumb woodstick.

'That's okay,' was all I could think of saying.

'Do you want anything?' she asked, her voice even and totally in control.

'I came to say...I am...I am...going to office today so no need to prepare breakfast or lunch for me.'

She nodded.

'Okay, that's all,' I said, 'Bye.'

'Bye,' she replied, her smile already beginning to relax and droop down.

I turned and tried to walk away. Tried, I say, because something pulled me back at her door before I had taken two full steps.

'I didn't mean anything,' I threw out.

'About what?'

'You know it well, what made you rush away as if I had thrown a bucket of stinging ants on you. But I didn't mean anything.'

She nodded again, 'Of course, I didn't think you did,' she said, smiling.

I nodded and turned to leave again. But that something again forced me to face her.

'You believe me, don't you? I really didn't mean or think anything bad about you,' I said.

'Of course, I believe you,' she said pleasantly, without bothering to consider whether she did or not.

'Okay then, bye,' I said.

'Bye,' she replied, and prepared to close the door.

But the purpose hadn't been solved yet. The gripping heaviness in my chest clearly said so.

'On second thought,' I said, stepping inside her door, 'Since I'm already here, how about a cup of tea? Your tea is much better than mine. And so are you sandwiches. But I rather feel like having an omelette today, if you know how to make it. I leave for office at 8:30. I suppose you can manage it by then, can't you? And if you still don't have tea, coffee would be fine too,' I rattled out, though I didn't get any answer to any of my questions.

I went and settled myself down on the sofa. I drummed out a rhythm on its arm. On a table beside the sofa, a handsome couple stood. I picked them up and decided to let them have the pleasure of a morning kiss. The guy seemed quite eager, but when I brought the two statues close, the lady's big hat came in way. I had to tilt the guy whole ninety degrees to let him have his dues.

Nirvi still kept herself away. I picked up the newspaper from the centre table. And I had browsed through the entire front page of it by the time Nirvi came in.

'What took you so long? Did you fall asleep again at the door?'

Okay, maybe the question didn't merit an answer. So she didn't give any. Then I tried with another and better thought out question.

'Where's Tiya?' I asked, without looking up from the paper.

'Sleeping,' she said.

I kept on reading the paper, or pretending to do so. She stood still meanwhile and stared at me. At last she said, 'You have no need to do this.'

'Do what?'

'This,' she waved her hand half at me and half generally in the air.

'What this?' I asked again.

'Nothing,' she said, and turned and hastened into her kitchen. I picked up the remote and switched on the TV.

In an instant I saw Nirvi storming back from kitchen.

'I told you Tiya is sleeping. Can't you at least lower the volume?' she hissed.

I switched the TV off and flipped the remote on the couch. 'Nothing good is coming anyway,' I informed her, before picking up the newspaper once again. I hoped I had not disturbed Tiya's sleep. One angry girl was giving me so much trouble. Two angry girls would have been too much to handle.

Nirvi went back to her kitchen. And while there, she made enough noise that Tiya did wake up and came rushing to check what disaster had overtaken her friend's kitchen.

She didn't know, Lemon Girl had woken up too.

And I could finally feel easy. The more she banged in the kitchen, the broader I smiled in the living room. It was fun.

Tiya's presence though calmed her down soon and in fifteen minutes I was served the pleasure of breakfasting with two very pretty young ladies.

And as we ate and Nirvi nibbled, I managed fairly well to carry on a conversation with Tiya that kept her giggling. Nirvi smiled sometimes too, and tinkled out her laugh at Tiya's jokes. But the laughter of her eyes, that I had seen years ago, did not even let its shadow appear.

And for some reason, that somehow made my own laughter sound hollow to me.

'So, you are going to office today? Why not take another day off to rest your ankle?' Tiya asked.

'I won't mind taking another day off,' I said, 'but my boss would. You know what he would say?'

'What?' she asked.

And I stood up and gave her quite an accurate display of what my boss would have said, and how.

Tiya was clutching her sides and rolling on the couch by the time I ended. But that's the fact of life. People do often laugh at other people's troubles.

'You are just being wicked. No way can your boss be as bad as that,' she said, gulping in air to douse down her laughter.

'Yeah, he is worse. I'm only being kind to him out of respect for his age,' I said.

'Can you mimic any Bollywood star too?' Tiya asked.

As a matter of fact, I can. And I still consider myself quite good at it too. And I had no problem putting up a show for the pleasure of the two ladies. I even mimicked some animals for them, with full acting.

'Ooh, stop it, you are so terrible at mimicry. Worst I have ever seen,' declared Tiya after full ten minutes of laughing and clapping.

Well, some part of me was also saying that I had made a thorough fool of myself. But that didn't matter. Tiya had enjoyed it, I knew.

And it had made even Nirvi holler out loud, quite forgetting her dainty fake laugh. And this time, her eyes laughed with her.

And all was well again with the world. And I finally could agree to my watch's insistence that I was getting late for the office and must be on my way already.

The apology that I had come to offer had yet not found its way out my throat. It still weighed a little on my heart. But my brain said it would spoil Nirvi's mood again by reminding her of what I had said. And I rather wanted those words scratched out from her memory, and mine. So I let the apology remain where it was, inside of me.

As I walked across the road towards my home, I knew she was watching me from the balcony. Tiya was with her too, of course. But it was Nirvi's eyes that I felt on me that day. And they had forgiven me. We were friends again. And even my injured ankle could skip a merry step now.

The merriment lasted only till next evening when I found out Sam had returned. He had promised me a ten days' reprieve. But obviously, he isn't the man of his words.

The Sam that had gone away had been a big gamer. The Sam that returned turned out to be a big revolutionary. Something had turned his head to revolution and recovering his country from the hands of politicians. He did tell me how he had got into that, but I didn't care to listen well enough to remember.

In short, he had decided to hold some sort of protest against the corruption. Though listening to him might have given you the very pleasant idea that the corruption had been squeezed out from the entire collective mass of the common man and had become concentrated in just a handful of politicians. And all the energies of all the 'awakened' youth must now be targeted against those handfuls. The rest was all fine, the rest was all innocent, and the common man was nothing but a poor victim, even if from the poorest to the richest, all licked the tar as and when the opportunity welcomed them to it.

But anyway, revolution was not the only thing he brought along.

When I returned from office that evening, I spotted Nirvi standing in her balcony. Her fingers clutched the railing, and she was staring into the air. I don't know what she was seeing in it, but it couldn't have been anything pleasant.

'Hi,' I called out to her, loudly enough for my voice to reach her second floor apartment.

My voice seemed to startle her. She lowered her eyes slowly, as if they needed time to find their way about, and then she saw me. Half a smile appeared on her face.

'Hi,' she said.

'All well? Where's Tiya?' I asked.

Nirvi shook her head to indicate that Tiya hadn't come. 'But Sam is here,' she added quickly, in a tone that forwarded an invitation and offered an excuse for me to visit her.

This was the first time when she had, by herself, invited me to her apartment. I could not refuse, even if it was at the cost of having to meet Sam. Besides, there had sounded in her voice an eagerness, a desperate sort of eagerness that was not required for just a casual invitation. She wanted me in her home, but she herself probably didn't realize it.

I went and found her waiting at the door. She said nothing and ushered me inside like a good hostess.

'Hey, Sam, how are you?' I asked, greeting Sam.

'Good, good, you returned early from office today?'

Had his desires been consulted, I most probably would have lost all rights to step out of the office.

'No, usual time, what are you doing?' I said.

Nirvi came in and handed me a glass of water. She did not bang it down on the table. She handed it to me, with a shade of a smile. However, all my efforts of the morning seemed to have gone waste. She wasn't angry with me anymore. But she definitely looked under some cloud. Something had happened to make her go pale again.

'Planning,' said Sam.

'Planning what?'

'I am not sure yet. It will either be a march, or a protest against corruption. Things have gone too far. Now we must do something. We can't let some dirty politicians eat our country away. As a responsible citizen it is our duty to raise our voice. We must...' that was where I stopped listening. For one, I was sure he had nothing new to say that was not already blaring out from every news channel those days. And secondly, I saw Nirvi go to the balcony again. And every tissue of my body burnt to be by her side.

But instead, I just asked Sam, 'What's wrong with Nirvi? Is she okay?'

'Yes, yes, she's fine. Just angry maybe, but it's not my fault. My parents are pressing me to get married. Though I have refused, told them that I don't want to get married right now. You know I have a good chance of being sent to US for a year, so don't want to get entangled in the marriage thing right now. But you know mothers, she smuggled in some pictures of her chosen girls into my suitcase. Nirvi found those photos and is now angry.'

Anger, though, wasn't what I had seen in her eyes. I liked her anger, and it always made me feel merrier.

I could no more bear not knowing what was bothering her. 'I'll go and talk to her,' I said, getting up.

'No need. I have told her it is nothing. She's just being silly.'

I went nevertheless. She was leaning on her balcony's railing and staring down at the road below.

'What are you looking at?' I asked as I stepped over to stand beside her.

'People,' her breath let out softly while she continued staring down.

'Huh? But there's nobody there,' I said, looking down.

'There would be when...I mean...if someone falls down.'

I liked neither the words, nor the ominous tone that uttered them. And while, I suppose, I should have felt concerned and alarmed, it was rage instead that spiked through my veins at that moment.

'Someone would have to be an utter fool or a coward to fall down from here,' I declared, in not a very kind voice. 'And you are both if you ever force my Lemon Girl to do that,' I wanted to add, but didn't, somehow.

Instead, I turned and walked out of the balcony. It took just five steps to quell the rage and the concern to finally raise its head. I positioned myself behind the balcony's door and kept a secret watch at her. There was no knowing what that girl might do.

Nirvi kept on staring down for some time longer. For a few moments, she leaned herself further and further over the railing. My heart pounded in my ears and I readied myself for a dash. But she stilled, and then jumped back raising her hands from the balcony as if it had scalded them. Slowly, and without turning, she took half steps back. I finally found my breath and let it have its passage in and out.

Nirvi too took a deep breath, folded her arms and walked back in with head raised and lips pursed in grim determination.

She was none of them, neither a coward, nor a fool. She was Lemon Girl. And I hope she did win back a little bit of herself that day.

I should have escaped back into the living room. But she had mesmerized me into stillness. She saw me staring at her from the balcony door. Her lips stretched out in a smile.

'You still here?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

That should have made her smile more, but it didn't. 'How is your sprain?' she asked.

'Gone.'

'Good,' she said.

And we both stood under the doorway, silent, but not uncommunicative.

Finally I dug up from my mind's store something irrelevant to speak.

'Did I tell you that the furniture arrived yesterday evening? The couch that is too big for my room, and the side tables that I don't need, and that thing full of drawers that you forced me to buy?'

'You told me in the morning.'

'You'll have to help me arrange them. I have no idea how I am going to fit them in my rooms.'

'Sure.'

'Arsh?' Sam called out from his couch. He had probably gotten uncomfortable about my having such a long chat with Nirvi. She was his victory over me. And he was not going to have me make a dent in that victory.

The fool had no idea how near he had come to losing even the outer crust of his dear sweet victory.

'What does he want now?' I grumbled.

'Maybe he wants you to help him choose his wife,' said Nirvi.

'I doubt it. And anyway, I'd never be a party to cursing a girl's life with such an idiot.'

'Idiot?' she smiled, 'Do you know how much he earns?'

'Oh. So you like his money. I was wondering what you saw in him,' I said, copying her smile and pasting it on my face.

'Arsh?' Sam called again.

'Coming,' I said, and went back to the gamer turned revolutionary moneybag. 'What?' I asked when I was back in the living room.

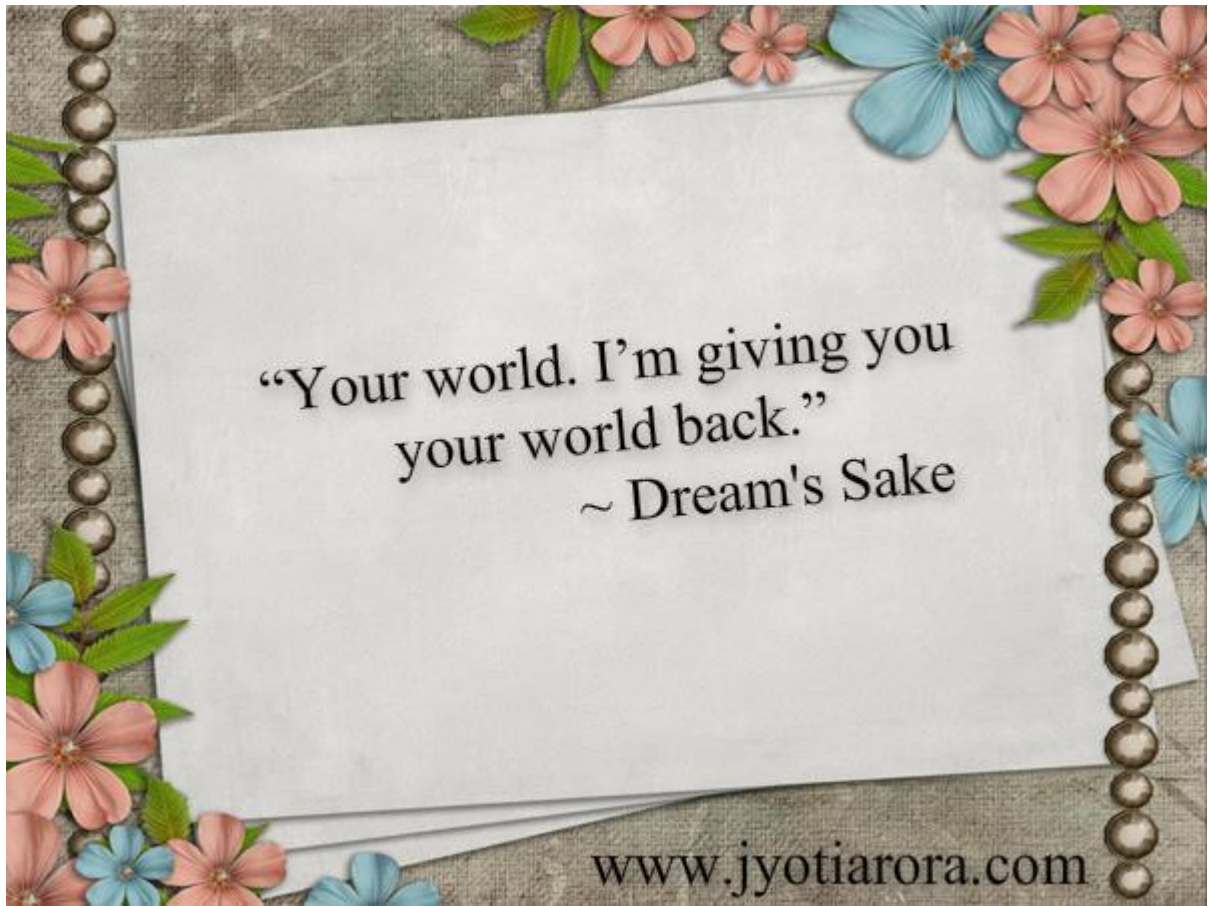
'I am having a meeting here next Sunday. Just a few of my friends would be here. Would you come too? We must unite in this fight against corruption.'

Nirvi came in just then, and I changed my answer. 'Sure,' I said.

'Great, see you then, buddy,' he said, getting up to shake my hand. And with that polite curtsy, I was ordered out of his home.

Before you proceed to the next chapter, here's something extra!

Excerpt of Dream's Sake



Chapter 11

Nirvi:

What I saw in Sam, you once asked me. You probably don't remember that evening now, do you?

Well, I didn't even see him. Scarcely mattered.

He was the door out of one cage. Didn't know then that it led into another one, just as crushing, and one from which I couldn't even wish an escape.

Escape needed a destination more beckoning. But I had nowhere to go.

It hadn't mattered when I had stepped out of my home. It hadn't mattered when I stepped into Sam's...apartment, for home I never could call it. Why had it started to matter now? I knew well how to flit from one branch to other. I could still catch another twig to rest upon.

But, for how long? What then?

I had no place to go.

The more days I spent in Sam's apartment, the more averse I felt it grow of me. I lived to please it, but I knew it was duty bound to please others. I decorated it for the moment, but it was built to house another. And I was but a temporary guest. Moreover, a permanent residence there seemed as dreary a prospect as being pushed out of it.

But I had nowhere else to go.

The thought slapped me every time I saw Sam looking at another girl. It blasted through my head when Sam hid my existence from his family. I sank myself lower and lower into his bed, but it still managed to crush me every night.

You can't control your thoughts when asleep. You can't push them away. And when your lids droop over your eyes, your mind stares wide eyed at what you'd rather not see. And the unbearable stays with you, running like a cursing chant all through the night. And you wake up in the middle of the night, a gong hitting you from within your head. And the weight of all the directions rushes in. Do you know, Arsh, how many directions there are? Four in daylight, innumerable in the dark. And the thought rushes out from each one of them like a blaring train. Rushes right at you. And you have no way to escape. Because you are lying half asleep in bed, and getting dazed by your own misery.

And as I stared down each direction, they all echoed the same curse. 'You are all alone. You have nowhere to go.' The words raced through my heartbeats, they pulsed in my temples, and all I could do was bury my head in my arms and scream without a sound.

No sound was to be uttered. For there was Sam sleeping besides me, close enough for his breath to choke my soul away. And he must not be disturbed, he must not be displeased, he must not be disappointed, for I had nowhere else to go.

'Nirvi, I hate that dress of yours.'

'Yes, Sam, I hate it too.' Though it was my favourite till then.

'Nirvi, you look great in black. It makes you look thinner.'

'Yes, Sam.' That means I look fat in other colours. I must starve myself more. He won't like me fat.

'Nirvi, do you really like those songs? They are so boring.'

'Yes, Sam, I was getting bored with these too,' though I had loved them since childhood. 'I am the best.'

'Yes, Sam, you are,' since he excelled in video games.

'Oh, Nirvi, you look gorgeous tonight.'

'All for you, dear,' since that's all that he cared for.

And then came his new craze.

'Nirvi, our country needs us. We must fight corruption.'

Did that mean not warming the pocket of the traffic policeman when caught speeding?

But that was a minor trespass. Corruption was where the politicians ate up millions. So,

'Yes, Sam, you are right. I'm so proud of you.'

'Nirvi, we must hold a protest,' he declared.

'Yes, Sam,' and that would be the only protest I make.

'Nirvi, I have a brilliant idea,' he said, pondering over the points discussed in the first meeting held for the grand task. 'We must design a pamphlet announcing our protest. We'll distribute it to everyone so more and more people could join us. We can have it in the colours of our national flag. With a wheel like watermark in between to make it more like our national flag.'

'Yes, Sam,' would have followed again surely.

But *you* would not have it so. I had not said anything. And you should not have been staring at me like that to hear even my unsaid words.

'Do you think that's a good idea, Nirvi? Tricolour pamphlets?' you asked.

'Of course. I'm sure tricolour pamphlets would be the best,' replied Sam.

You should have, by then, understood that Sam's choice was always the best. And the views, ideas, opinions that did not belong to him were all worthless, even if all the rest of the world favoured them.

'What do you think, Nirvi?' you asked nevertheless.

'Sam's idea is great.'

'See, she agrees with me,' said Sam.

'Yes, like a parrot as always, I see,' you laughed. 'And she's getting better and better at it too.'

'Can't we both have the same opinion?' Sam asked

'Sometimes, maybe. But if two people agree 100% all the time, one of them is faking. And I much rather prefer a genuine disagreement, then fake agreement. If I ever want that, I would get myself a real parrot,' you said.

'But she really thinks that this idea is great, don't you, Nirvi?'

I looked at you, and hung myself between a yes and a no, without uttering either.

'There, you have your answer. She thinks your idea is crap,' you told Sam.

'I do not,' I protested. And you fixed your eyes on me and then there was no escape.

'I...I just think...people are often careless with pamphlets. They throw it in garbage, or on the street, use it to wipe their hands...' I had to utter.

'Or their noses,' you added.

'What do you mean?' Sam asked.

'I mean, it would be like insulting the national flag if...'

'If people do all that to your tricolour pamphlets,' you completed my sentence. And Sam didn't like that. You had no right to complete my sentence.

'So what do you want? Should we distribute boring white pamphlets that nobody would even look at? Instead of the tricolour that will grab their attention and raise their patriotic fervour?'

'No, I was just saying...'

'I wish we would get some good sponsors. I want to have tricolour T-shirts as well. For the organizing committee at least. That would be great, don't you think?' Sam asked me.

'Yes, Sam,' I said, and what I thought obviously didn't matter. 'I hope I won't look fat in saffron and green,' I said, settling down beside him and wrapping my arms around him and giving him a kiss to dispel his frown and raise a smile in its place.

He looked at you, and smirked, and I lowered my head on his shoulder and gave him reason to smirk some more.

'Well, I must be off now,' you said, getting up. 'When is the next meeting?'

That day's meeting had long been over. Much had been planned. Sam had divided various responsibilities in different sections and delegated them to his friends, and some of their friends. Now all that remained to be done was for them to prove their patriotism by honouring those responsibilities as they deserved to be honoured.

All three of Sam's friends had gone away more than half an hour ago. But you waited on for Tiya who hadn't yet arrived.

'Next meeting? Not fixed yet,' Sam replied.

'Fine,' you said, and walked out of the room. I followed you to see you off at the door.

'You should be ashamed of yourself, traitor,' you said, as soon as we reached the door. 'What? Traitor?' I asked.

'You know what is right, about those pamphlets. And still you won't say it and let your country get insulted. Traitor,' you said. And though you seemed to be joking, the very words of that joke seemed to be bound together by taut strung resentment.

'I tried, didn't I? But Sam doesn't think...'

'Yes, I agree to that. He doesn't think. And that is why he needs the aid of your brain cells.'

'My brain cells are no good. They give worthless ideas that don't matter to anyone.'

'That's not true. Your ideas made my home look awesome. So they do matter to me at least. And if they don't matter to others, then you must make them matter. That's what I do. That's the only way to make people listen to you.'

I shrugged and maybe you thought your words hadn't meant anything to me. Well, it is true that words didn't often mean much to me those days. But yours did. They echoed in my head, and snaked their way into my heart and contaminated all my hushed opinions with a voice from then on.

Just then, the door in front of ours opened and a young girl peeked out.

'Nirvi di, wait, wait, I need your help,' she called out in a hoarse whisper. I knew the meaning of that whisper too well. But you didn't, and it showed on your face.

'I can't help you, I'm sorry,' I replied, confusing you even more.

'Oh, please, Didi. And don't worry, mom is sleeping. I have a fresher's party tomorrow. I've bought such an awesome dress. Lovely mauve colour. But forgot to buy matching nail colour! Do you have anything that would go with mauve? Please, please please!'

'I'll leave you two ladies alone now,' you said, grinning in your eyes.

But before you could step out, her mother stepped in.

'Neha! How many times I have told you, you are not to talk to that girl. Come inside and close the door this moment,' Mrs. Banerjee shouted.

And you whirled back.

'What do you mean with that? What's wrong with talking to Nirvi?' you demanded instantly.

'Leave, Arsh,' I cut you short. 'This does not concern you, so leave.'

'But, Nirvi, didn't you hear...' you were shocked at my stopping you.

'Never mind, leave,' I said.

And I would have sent you off. But Mrs. Banerjee didn't want you gone so soon. She was ready enough to tell you, or anyone else, what exactly was wrong with me. She grew red as she spoke. And you grew whiter and whiter as you listened. I saw you clench your fists.

'I have told her she is not to come near my daughter. But why would she listen? She wants to spoil my daughter too. Shameless, characterless...' continued Mrs. Banerjee.

'Enough!' you shouted, loud enough to stun even her into silence. 'Just because she is...' 'Don't shout, Arsh,' I interfered again. 'She's just trying to protect her daughter...'

'All mothers protect their daughters, but that doesn't mean...'

All mothers don't Arsh, all mothers don't. But Mrs. Banerjee was not one of those. She wanted to protect her daughter from all ills. And you had to respect her for that. Even if she was loud mouthed and quarrelsome. She loved her daughter. I didn't want you to shout at Mrs. Banerjee. You didn't know it, Arsh, but she was the one woman who was keeping my faith in motherhood intact. No, I didn't want you to shout at her.

'I don't mind it, so...' I began.

'And why are *you* getting so hyper about it anyway?' asked Sam as he walked out to join us. He, of course, saw no reason to mind Mrs. Banerjee. Maybe because Mrs. Banerjee had never yet objected to him. She too thought it was all my fault.

Of course, it was.

You ignored Sam, but would not move your eyes away from me.

'Nirvi?' you asked, after glaring at me for a full minute. 'Why do you let her call you such names? Don't you have any self respect in you?'

I stepped closer to Sam, linked my arm into his and smiled at you.

Your eyes widened with rage. You didn't tell me what you thought of my answer. But your storming down the stairs the very next moment shouted it loud enough.

Five minutes after you left, Tiya arrived. 'What? Has everyone left already?' she asked.

'You missed them by only an hour,' said Sam.

'Whatever. But did Arsh come too? When did he leave?' she asked. 'See, I bought the phone he had recommended. I wanted to show it to him.'

'Show it to me first,' said Sam.

She did, he saw it, tested it, frowned on it, and in five minutes declared it not worth the purchase.

'Yeah, what do you know? You are not a gadget expert like Arsh. But hey, who was the girl you had lunch with today? My friend Shruti saw you at the restaurant. At first she thought you were with Nirvi. But when she approached closer to you she saw you were with someone else. Who was she?' asked Tiya, frowning up her forehead, raising her brows and fixing her eyes at Sam.

I had told her about the photographs in Sam's suitcase. So now she trusted him even less than before.

'Just an office colleague. Our team lead Manoj was there too, with us. He must have gone to get something when Shruti saw us, so she thought I was with a girl,' said Sam, shuffling up his papers and getting up from the sofa. 'I'll leave you two girls alone now, must note down what has been planned today.'

'But I called you at lunch. You said you were too busy to talk,' I reminded him, forcing my voice not to echo the shouts rising up in my heartbeats.

'I was, at that time,' he said, moving away quickly. But I took hold of his sleeve.

'You lied to me?' I had no need to ask that question, I already knew.

He closed his eyes and looked away from me. 'Yes, so I did,' he said, turning back to me and shrugging my hold off his sleeve. 'What else could I have done? I didn't go with my colleagues, okay? My mother had made me promise that I'd go and meet Kriti at least once. So I had to go. But you had become so hyper just seeing those photographs. How could I have told you?'

'Okay. So, when is the marriage to be?' I asked.

'Come on, I'm not marrying her. Just went to meet her because of mother.'

'But why can't you tell your parents about Nirvi? Aren't you like lying to your parents too?' said Tiya.

'Do you think this is easy for me? My parents live so far away, still every day I live in dread of them finding out that I'm living with a girl without marriage. That's worse than them finding out that I married someone without their permission. I wish I had known what I was doing when I brought her here. It wouldn't have been so hard had we married before moving in. My parents would have accepted Nirvi sooner or later. But this girl didn't want marriage. And now my parents wouldn't want a daughter-in-law who...besides Nirvi herself said that we'd live together for a year, at least, to make sure we are good for each other. And if we are not, then we are free to go our separate ways. That's what you said, didn't you, Nirvi? So why should I give my parents such a shock when there isn't anything certain between you and me yet?'

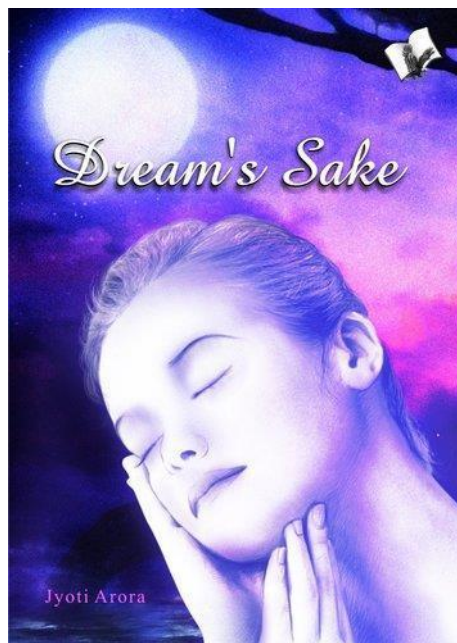
'So, you'll keep on meeting other girls and deceiving everyone?' Tiya asked.

'I have told my parents I don't want to marry yet. How is it my fault if my parents still keep on pushing girls at me? And what harm has been done if I went to meet someone just to please my mother? I have a duty towards my parents too, you know. I'm their only son. And Nirvi knows well I have no plans to get married yet. So chill.'

Chill was exactly what was spreading over my heart. If only it could have numbed me forever too.

Dream's Sake, published by V&S Publishers is available as ebook in all popular format. Paperback also available in book stores and online retailers like Flipkart in India.

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Chapter 12

Arsh:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any girl of any cast, colour or creed is always an epitome of unpredictability. And Nirvi was no different. She was, in fact, doubly so because she had two different individuals living in one single frame.

I didn't catch a glimpse of her for the next six days. And then, Saturday morning, she arrived at my door, once again holding a warm lunchbox.

'Hey, what's up? All well? Where's Sam?' I asked her, surprised by her early visit.

'Sam has gone away with his friends. They had to meet someone about that protest, and finalize a lot of things,' said Nirvi. But her eyes did not bother to lie. And in the course of the morning, she let it trickle out that Sam's plan for the day did include a hefty allowance of fun with his friends.

'See, I brought you something. You haven't had breakfast yet, have you?' she asked, coming in.

'No, and thanks! What have you brought? I have become so sick of breakfasting on cereals or bread and butter. How did you know I felt like eating something special today?' my words raced out, drooling over the hot lunchbox.

Nirvi lifted her eyes slowly up to me. 'How did I know what you were feeling?' she said, coming closer and standing right in front of me, 'just as you know what I feel. Just as you always know...'

I smiled, feeling at once proud of myself.

The voice she used could never have belonged to my Lemon Girl. But it suited Nirvi well.

Nirvi hadn't moved her hands. Yet I felt her touch on me warmly enough. Maybe it was her eyes, or her voice, whatever. It was thrilling. I could see she was in a weird mood. But I didn't really mind. It was her problem. And I felt great.

'Nice. And hey, what has been decided about those pamphlets?' I asked. 'I told Tiya about Sam's idea and she...'

'What a mess,' Nirvi said, ignoring my words and noticing my room instead.

It wasn't quite so dirty actually, just a couple of things lying out of place. Okay, maybe four or five things, maybe a couple more. These she started putting back in order without losing much time.

Nirvi evidently liked noticing the disorder of my room and putting it back to order. Seeing her do it felt good to me too, in a warm sort of way.

'There, that's done. Breakfast now?' she asked.

'Sure,' I said.

She laid the table for me, putting two plates on it this time. 'You haven't eaten either?' I asked.

'No, Arsh,' she said, honey dripping in her voice now, 'I'm as hungry as ever. But I'm sure you won't let me stay hungry for long, would you?'

'No, of course not.'

'So come,' she called.

And I went.

She pulled her chair closer to mine and took up the role of the most charming hostess. In a minute, I found my plate heaped with creamy pasta, with a smaller heap of chilly potatoes on the side.

The food was delicious, but the conversation that she let flow between us was more so. She smiled, she laughed, she teased, she blushed at my teasing and she turned sober, serious, and emotional by turns. She made fun of her previous boyfriends, and even Sam. She made me give her lessons in mimicry, and used them to give a most hilarious performance, though with very poor mimicry. An hour passed away, the food vanished, but the chatter still continued.

She asked me about my home, my family, seeming most interested in every detail. I indulged her curiosity happily, hoping she would indulge mine as well. But that still didn't happen. Every time I tried steering her towards her past, she steered towards my future instead.

'So, when are you starting that blog of yours? I would love to help you decide its look.' she said.

'Wouldn't Sam mind?' I asked, allowing my special wicked smile on my face.

'Maybe, but he need not know. And even if he does, maybe I wouldn't mind his minding so much now,' she said, looking straight into my eyes.

'Good for you,' I said. Okay, I suspected there was some greater meaning in those words, something that asked for a different response. Her eyes seemed to say so. And they looked disappointed when I failed. But I had eaten too much and it seemed like too much trouble to think that deeply. So 'good for you' had to suffice. If she had to say anything, she had to say it clear. Making me decipher meaning wasn't going to help her.

'I'm not kidding,' she said. And she did seem serious and earnest all of a sudden. And her eyes dimmed a little. 'Don't waste away your dream in being lazy. Dreams are precious, you know, and you are lucky to have a dream. Tiya has many dreams too and a hundred different plans for her future.'

I could not help but smile at that and almost failed to notice the dwindling of Nirvi's voice.

'Having a dream must make it easier to look to the future, right?' she asked.

'Everybody has dreams and future plans, no big deal in that,' I shrugged.

'No, not everyone,' she said, lowering her eyes.

But those eyes flicked up the very next instant, bright and alert as before. And so was her voice, bright and alert. 'I mean not everyone can make his dream true. But I'm sure you would,' she said, her hand reaching out to caress mine. 'You'd be great blogger. And your blog would become huge success. And we'd become rich, and...' she continued as her fingers passed through the gaps between my fingers. Her eyes locked onto mine.

'Hold on, it's not so easy. There's lot of competition,' I tried to reason. I really didn't do it on purpose, but as I spoke I saw my thumb had started rubbing her fingers. I stopped and stared at our hands, trying to understand how they had come to be so clasped.

And had she said 'we'? I wasn't sure. 'Why would she say we? I must have been mistaken,' I thought.

But maybe I wasn't.

'Don't you worry, everything will end up great, just as you want it. And what you want might even be yours already. All you have to do is reach out and take it. Whatever it is. All you have to do is try,' she said, clasping my hands tighter.

Again I felt the weight of some added meaning in those words. But I ignored that and, 'Thanks,' I said, making sure to smile as I spoke.

'For what?'

'For the encouragement.'

'And?'

'And...bringing breakfast for me, cleaning my room.'

'I liked doing that.'

'You are a great friend,' I said. I once again tried to smile, but there was something in her eyes and voice that made me want to scowl instead.

'Friend?' she laughed at that word. 'Do you think I go about cooking breakfast and cleaning rooms of all my friends?' As she spoke, she leaned the elbow of her free hand on the table and rested her chin on her palm. She smiled and her eyes sent a tickle racing through me.

But along with that arose a sense of irritation. My mind was no longer drowsing. Instead, it raced between past and present, unearthing moments, none of which supported the possibility that she was now attesting. And it was too sudden, too sudden to be real. And she was smiling too much. Her voice was too sweet. Her eyes too full of love, love for me? But her eyes did not just drip honey into my eyes, they were intent and observing too, maybe watching to see how eagerly I lapped up the sweetness she offered.

Well, my body declared its willingness pretty clearly to me. But my mind frowned. It would not believe. It could not believe. There was some game she was playing on me. And I hated to be played upon.

'I thought you loved Sam,' I said.

'I thought so too. And I thought he loved me too. But he loves his duties more. His parents, his country....he...' she silenced herself and looked away. Probably she had said more than she intended.

And I knew now what she was trying to do. She had become insecure of Sam, so she was trying to latch on to me. Maybe she thought me an easy target, and an eager one too. Disgusting!

I hated Nirvi at that moment. She had killed my Lemon Girl and turned her into a parasite. I hated her.

'But you do care about me, don't you?' she continued, after a moment. 'You are not like Sam. You feel my pain. Only you. And only you know who I really am,' she said. Her hand reached up to touch my face. 'And, Arsh, there's no greater comfort than having someone who knows.' Her voice became softer and softer. She moved a strand of hair from my forehead. Slowly, her fingers slipped downwards, closing my eyes and moving lower, down to my lips. 'Because,' she breathed out, 'when you are hurting in your heart, it's no use even if the entire world asks you how you are feeling. All you need is to be held by someone who doesn't need to ask.' Her fingers halted a moment, trembling.

I knew I had to push that hand off. But I couldn't. I couldn't. She had put me above all the world. And her words were like magnets, pulling me to her. And my arms were more than ready to obey her desire. To hold her, to comfort her, to soothe away all her pain.

But I knew it was all a lie. Not her pain. But her act, her words, her looks...An enchanting lie, but a lie.

She brushed my lips with her fingertips. Then her hand moved lower still, caressing my neck. 'To be held by someone who...' she continued in a whisper, coming closer, warming my skin with her breath. Her chest heaved, and her lips were just a hair breath away from mine.

I jumped from my chair and moved away. 'Don't you dare,' I threw at her. 'Have a little respect for me, if you can't respect yourself!'

She had already made so many dents in my image of the Lemon Girl. But this was one black stroke I could not bear. Irritation rose up to scorch my skin with thousand pulsating

sparks. And all I could do was clench my fists and stare at her. Though I do not know what frustrated me more, her efforts, or the responses that rose up in me because of them. Nirvi had never felt more irresistible as she did then. And I had never hated her more.

Her eyes grew wider, and her endeavours suffered an instant's interruption. That was the only indication to show that my words hadn't wasted away like water on a slippery stone. They had entered her consciousness, but she still refused to listen to them.

'I would dare,' she said, once again plastering a smile on her face, 'because I know you want me to. Why are you refusing me?' she asked, still daring to come close to me.

'I don't want you. I already have a girlfriend,' I declared.

'No need to lie. I know you have nobody,' she said, smiling at me.

'I do.'

'Who?'

'Tiya.' Tiya was the first name that popped into my mind. But it served well.

'Tiya is your girlfriend?' Nirvi laughed. 'But then, you are not the only one who thinks so.'

'She is my girlfriend and I am her boyfriend. She likes me. And we are going on a date today evening.'

Nirvi's eyes had remained fixed at mine all this while. Now, they seemed to bore even deeper. I don't know what she saw in me. But it did manage to make her give up. For an instant, she seemed to shrink into herself. But just for an instant.

Her one act was over. But even if it was a failure, she was trained enough to quickly put on another mask, and skid over to a different play.

A smile had remained hovering on Nirvi's lips all this while. It stretched out a little more now. The only difference was that instead of seduction, it bore more a shade of mockery. Although, I can't say whether that grin of hers was mocking me, or herself.

'Tiya likes you?' she asked laughing.

'Yes,' I said.

'She would have told me.'

'Maybe she didn't want to,' I threw at her.

Nirvi laughed at this and shook her head.

'Actually,' she said, winking at me, 'Tiya did. Yes, she told me that you two were going on a date today.'

She had seen through my game. As I through hers.

I folded my arms, pursed up my lips and stared at her. There were a hundred things that I wanted to shout out to her. But at that time, I didn't feel like speaking even a syllable. I just wanted her gone.

'And I came here today to test whether you deserved her or not. Tiya won't be your girlfriend till she has my approval of you, you know,' Nirvi continued, looking straight at me as firmly as if what she was saying was the truest truth in the world.

'If that's true then I passed your test, didn't I?' I asked.

Nirvi stepped up to me, brushed one finger on my forehead, picking up some droplets of sweat from there.

'Do you think so?' she said, waving the finger at me.

Had I known how to growl like a grizzly, I would have used that sound at that moment, because words just couldn't suffice to communicate my feelings. But as that was beyond my powers, I chose to remain silent and let my eyes glare and growl as loudly as they could.

But it mattered little. There was an impervious shield of indifference that she had folded around her. Nothing seemed capable of piercing that shield, nothing seemed capable of affecting her. She was impossible to reach.

She smiled, fluttered her eyes at me, gathered her lunchbox and was gone in a minute. And I remained standing, staring at empty air and zooming in and out of moments past to try and understand them.

One of those moments reminded me that I was going on a date with Tiya that evening. And Tiya still didn't know.

I took out my mobile and dialled her number.

'Hey, Arsh. What's up?' said Tiya, answering my call. 'We are going on a date this evening,' I told her. 'What?'

'Didn't you hear me? We are going on a date this evening.'

'Wow, you like doing things suddenly, don't you? But why would I go on a date with you?'

'Because I said so.' Because I had told Nirvi I would. Because I had to make Nirvi believe that Tiya was my girlfriend. Because I had to make myself believe that I had no interest in Nirvi other than plain curiosity. I did not want her. I did not care for her. She had some serious problems, and I had no desire of entangling myself in them. I wanted Tiya. Tiya was a good girl. Tiya was sweet, cheerful, happy and pretty. And rich. I wanted Tiya. And I just had to spend some time with her to make myself believe that more.

'And where do you propose to take me?' Tiya asked.

'You choose,' I said, and cut the call.

Two mistakes. One, being rude to Tiya. Two, letting her choose where she wanted to go. Big mistakes, both of them. And I knew they were going to cost me dear. But I could not go back on my word. And it didn't matter. Let Tiya rob me if she wanted to, all I wanted was to be on a date with her that evening.

It was nearly midnight when I drove back towards my apartment. And altogether, the time of the evening had passed away so pleasantly that I would have stretched it out further if I could.

When I had asked Tiya for a date, my first thought had been to make true the claim I had made before Nirvi. But of course, the second thought was there too. And the second thought promised that it was going to be a very pleasant evening. After all, Tiya hadn't refused, had she? Not even after the weird way I had ordered her to be my date. There was something in that, wasn't there? Something that allowed me to whistle as I got ready, I mean during the moments when I could push the recollections of the morning away and concentrate on the expectations of the evening.

And well, the evening so far fulfilled my expectations and raised so many more that I could very easily whistle back to my home too, feeling merry as a buzzing bee. I had fully enjoyed myself, and I knew my date had enjoyed herself too, after she had compensated for my rudeness by choosing the most expensive restaurant and then helping the waiters rob me almost down to the clothes I wore.

As I drove back home, I could not but consider the day as one of my luckiest. No matter what had followed afterwards, it had been very pleasant breakfasting with Nirvi. And then, no matter what led up to it, it was also very pleasant dining with Tiya. Both pretty girls, capable of making you warm all over just by the look of their eyes.

And yet, how different they were from each other.

Nirvi hid, Tiya shared. Nirvi groped for support, Tiya danced alone and free. Nirvi mystified, Tiya mesmerized. Nirvi seemed to confine herself in the now. Tiya enjoyed the now, loved the past and fantasized about the future. Nirvi was like a candle on a dinner table. Every gleam of her light consumed her own being. And the diners around her didn't even realize, or barely cared. Tiya, on the other hand, would be the merry hostess serving dinner on that table, illuminating the room with her smiles and cheer and receiving her just reward and gratitude from all delighted guests.

I suppose the choice was easy to make.

Whenever I was with Tiya, I always felt sure of everything. But when I was with Nirvi, she somehow made me feel unsure of even me. And though I would rather have it the other way round, yet somehow, the doubts Nirvi produced lasted much longer than the sense of surety Tiya could give.

However, as I drove back home, my heart was full of surety, surety that Tiya was the best for me. Life with her held very sweet and pleasant promises. And I could make sure her happiness never dwindled either. There was no knowing what anyone else would do to her. But I was sure I would never hurt her one bit. She was a merry little bird. The world was full of hunters. God had chosen me to protect her. God had chosen her to fill my life with happiness and love. End of the story.

There was no reason to think about anything else.

'Nirvi? What is she doing out so late?' the words escaped my lips when I caught sight of her slipping along the silent road of our housing society. A pleasant little plan of life with Tiya was just budding up in my mind. But it slipped and fell down as I zoomed my bike in a U-turn and followed Nirvi.

'Hey, out so late? Where's Sam?' I asked, siding up to her and bringing my bike's speed down to a crawl.

'Sam won't be coming back tonight.'

~~~ END OF SAMPLE ~~~

Lemon Girl is available as ebook and paperback. For all availability options, please visit: <http://www.jyotiarora.com/lemon-girl>

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