

## **AMI AND RIYA**

A Story By Deepak Jeswal

*Note - The following story was started sometime in 2005 but I could never complete it. Here it is for all reader's who might just like to read the beginning... this is an unedited and unchecked version!*

### **Part One- Delhi**

#### **Chapter One**

When one travels northwards, raw desert dunes give way to sandy brown sprawling Delhi, cutting across the dry Aravalli ranges. It is as if the city is merged with earth, refusing to rise above its mother's lap. Its few skyscrapers are anomalies than rule, and any dash of color beyond brown and dusty green are exceptions than dictums. A city that is as old as time; within its deep bowels are folded tales of humiliation, lust, love and valor when marauders and traders alike came to ravage its honor, some stayed back to dignify it, others simply trampled and moved ahead. Time and again it has been destroyed, rebuilt and destructed yet again. Several newer towns were built alongside old ones, and today all of them form one seamless mammoth whole.

It accepts everyone, but with a difference - the guest has to make it its own, the city will not do it. Its biggest turning phase in modern times, the Indian independence, saw a simultaneous shake up rocketing on one side to the high of being designated national capital, and plunging to the depths as battered refugees sank within its laps looking for succor. Perhaps, due to this ricocheting in its destiny, the city knows no moderation. It is the city of extremes- even the weather runs from the arid summer heat to the stark winter chills. Or perhaps, it was always fated to be one, destined to never admit its love, yet longing to be loved.

Yet it is a sensuous - not the sexiness that stares on your face with its come-hither glare, but shyness that beckons with a furtive glance. It's buxom and bountiful, and has beauty founded in its past yielding to the vast modernist skies, but the roots are deep and formidable. And like the sky above, it is open and vast, wide and large - again, moderation takes a back-seat.

There is unique laidback attitude that pervades the air; laidback not in the negative connotation of being lazy or lethargic, but in a positive note of being relaxed and enjoying whatever is being done. There is no nervous rush, nor there a hectic commotion that makes you feel agitated.

Delhi is India's capital, the serene vermillion dot on a bride's face, placed northward on the country's feminine-like geography.

#### **Chapter Two**

Ami Mehrotra was born on a humid July night, delivered amidst antiseptic hospital walls of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). She was a normal delivery; there were no complications, and her mother Sudha Mehrotra had an effortless pregnancy. Often her consulting doctor, Asha Gupta would remark that she was one of the best patients to have. All tests would be normal. And Sudha never complained about any discomfort. Sudha would smile back and return contented to her home in R K Puram, a flat allotted to them from Ministry of Home Affairs, where her husband worked as Section Officer.

The labor pains arrived at an easy early evening time, when the nearby taxi stand was full. During the ride to AIIMS, on the back-seat of a bulky Ambassador, Sudha sat beside her husband Suresh, without any overt discomfort, apart from an acute apprehension and excitement thumping within her heart. It was her first time, and at twenty-six, she felt like a child herself about to get a much awaited toy.

The taxi driver, a Sikh, seeing his passenger's condition drove carefully but steadily through the blazing heat of Delhi, overtaking few Padminis and many yellow-and-black autorickshaws, a staple traffic sight of late-seventies. At the hospital gate, he refused to take his fare remarking that he had done a good deed, and it was his honor to ferry a pregnant lady to her destination. Sudha, who believed a lot in omens and signs, took that as a good gesture. Her child would be born safe.

Yet, when Ami came to this world, she created a flutter in Dr. Asha Gupta's mind. For the next five minutes, the baby refused to cry. Her face contorted to a deep blue, and Asha felt her hand spanking the soft bum hard with each time. Her eye caught the steadfast stare of those tiny eyes, as they struggled with the oxygen remnant in the fragile body. Even though she busied herself with her next course of action, Asha Gupta was arrested by the eyes - they seemed to carry a determination far beyond the normal, as if the child had carried forward a resolute stance from its previous life. Asha Gupta, though a compassionate lady, felt herself angered, and with a loud spank hit the bottom again. This time, the eyes blinked, and the girl let out a wail.

Ordinarily, Asha Gupta would have forgotten the case as just another from the many of her profession. But, those eyes haunted her forever. And Ami's eyes were her strength. Often later, when Sudha would apply 'kaajal' to them, she would notice a fierce look in them that would make her think whether the world was good enough for her daughter!

Three days later, Sudha and Suresh brought Ami home to their neat flat, just as All India Radio announced the resignation of Prime Minister Morarji Desai. Sudha listened to the news disinterestedly, while Suresh hung to each word. Even though change of government did not mean anything great where his work was concerned, the subtle changes that came with any new minister disturbed him. He was not a man given to change, and this time it had come two years early, and it was twice in a span of a week - he realized that with an infant, their routine would never be the same.

However, old routines give way to new habits, and before long Suresh could not even recall a time when Ami was not present in his life. He also noticed there was something special about his daughter - though she looked like many Indian babies, suitably dusky and not very chubby, but there was something dignified in the way she looked up at him. He would always stop a second to admire that. As the days advanced, he would feel a pride watching his child grow. At office, it became a habit for him to talk about her at least once - how she had burped the last evening, or how she had moved her body to the music from Chitrahara on Doordarshan, or how she had cried the whole night due to fever - his colleagues would smile at him indulgently, some realizing the joys of being a father, the other simply politely wondering what made a man go berserk at birth of his child!

On the other hand, Sudha didn't show the same exuberance, though inwardly she felt more. But then she was always a quiet woman, who found her happiness within her family and home. She did not have many friends, and apart from polite talks with her neighbors, she did not spend much time with them. She was happier in spending her time working for the household. Her sole entertainment source was Vividh Bharti programs on radio, which would be on at a very low volume as she went about preparing food, or cleaning house, or if nothing else,

knitting a sweater for her husband. Her house displayed her personality - simple, neat, homespun yet very elegant and comforting.

She slipped into a mother's role easily, having observed her own mother carefully over the years. Both Sudha and Suresh heralded from India's biggest societal sector - the middle class. Life for them often meant a few sacrifices, a few hardships, but in the end a smooth journey without any bumps or hiccups.

This was Ami's world - built on a strong foundation, fortified with rock-solid walls of duty and morals.

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When she turned four, Ami joined Mt. Carmel School at Anand Niketan. This was a new world for her. The school, then situated in a house facing a huge park, was not the best, but was considered decent enough to begin one's education. Principal Williams and his wife had taken due pains to ensure that they established it with the correct reputation. Mrs. Williams, who often took an interview with a new student, sat smiling benignly at the young girl. With her bead like eyes, Ami captured the new sights and sounds with delight. She had inherited quietness from her mother, but her eyes were as voluble as her father. They danced at the pictures of cartoons and cutouts of animals and charts made of crayons; they cringed at Lord Jesus's blood dripping picture at the cross; they looked excitedly outside where other children were swinging in the park; they lowered abashedly realizing that the lady was looking at her.

"Do you like this place?" asked Mrs. Williams, leaning forward.

Ami smiled back shyly, but not once did her eyes stop to twinkle or capture all that they could ever absorb in their little pupils. Instinctively Mrs. Williams knew that Ami would be an interesting pupil to have. She signed the 'approval' on the admission forms.

For Ami, school was an exciting sojourn. Suddenly she was facing a sea of like-sized individuals but in varying degree of hues and shapes, their voices ranging from the whine to the squeak. Then there were adults, or 'ma'ams' as she was asked to call them. They were vastly different from her mother; they spoke so much, and they answered her questions in sentences longer than five-six words. But what gave her most pleasure were not people, but what she was taught - there was something called 'alphabets' which broke the words that she spoke, but then they also constructed new ones for her. There were colors in the art room, crayons and papers which aided her to design her imaginations on white paper. Everyday, she would make something new - her room, her mother, her father, her television, her radio, her park and bring it excitedly home to her parents. Sudha would smile but if someone could measure Suresh's chest, it would have expanded several inches. Next day, he had yet another fact to regale his office audience with.

Ami's interest in extra-curricular extended from drawing to various other arts. Mrs. Williams remarked on her sweet voice. Perhaps, she spoke less; her voice was preserved to sing. Two years later, when she was in her second grade, she was selected as the youngest member of school choir. By then, Ami had endeared herself to the entire faculty. She was a reticent student, and every teacher remarked that when they taught her, they could realize whether she had understood or not by just seeing her eyes.

For six years Sudha and Suresh were engrossed in Ami. They did not plan or have a second child. Sudha was not interested; she feared that her second pregnancy might not be as lucky as her first one. It was an unfounded fear. But she held to it. Suresh did not press. He did not want to share his love for Ami with another child. To him it was incredulously impractical to love two children with same devotion. There was bound to be partiality, he stated.

He had promoted to Senior Section Officer, which meant a larger pay packet as well. As a foresight, he had applied to Delhi Development Authorities' new Self Financing Scheme flats that were coming up at far flung places in Rohini and Naraina. Those areas were virtually uninhabited. But then, those were the only areas that he could afford.

Suresh had planned to move Ami to a better and happening school. His Ami's talents could not be wasted in an establishment that operated from a bungalow. This was not entirely correct. Mt. Carmel's new building was nearly ready and the school would shift there soon.

Often on evenings, when they would sit at the balcony looking out at the setting sun behind the large open space, he would tell her, "Look at that building, there you shall go soon". Delhi Public School was right next to his house in RK Puram. And from their balcony, they could just see an edge of the spectacular school building.

Saying so, quickly he would turn his eyes away from brown and alluring Sangam Cinema, which was also visible, on the right side, across the small junction of roads. A large poster of current superstar Amitabh Bachchan's film would be displayed. But he knew, he had to save money. Films will come anytime later. In any case, all that Bachchan's films had were mindless action.

DPS was considered the best public school, having churned out several successful alumni from its hallowed corridor. But when he went there for admissions, a stern lady looked at his sober gray trousers and simple crème shirt disdainfully and remarked, "Our fees are Rs. 5000 per month. Plus, you would have to make an initial deposit to School Welfare Fund for Rs 1,00,000"

Suresh's face fell. He knew 'donation' to this school went under the high-sounding euphemism of 'School Welfare Fund' but nowhere was he prepared that it would be this high.

"I hope you understand that we give the best education in this city for an all-round development of student's personality" the woman went on, adjusting her large steel-rimmed spectacles. Suresh knew this very well, but he also suspected that part of this donation also went to sponsor those expensive and modern frames, as also her high quality chiffon saree, which did not suit her bulky body at all. Perhaps, Sudha would look in that better. But he could not afford those fancy Garden Saris, and Sudha never really cared for them. She found the cottons more comfortable.

He cleared his voice, and said, "Yes very well. I do understand. I shall come back day after tomorrow to pay this money."

He trudged back home, his feet laden, dejected and hopeless. Early January winter sun had set. A shining turquoise Premier Padmini passed him. Wistfully he looked at the receding car. For once, he wished he was rich enough. He knew that his savings were enough to fund the donations, but that would mean breaking all fixed deposits and probably even taking an advance from the provident fund. The DDA house had to go.

"No way," exclaimed Sudha, when she heard about this. "I love Ami, and care about her. But money always helps. We cannot part with our entire savings for her admission"

"I understand that. But DPS provides more than just education. They even teach horse-riding to their students"

"Ami needs education, which Mt. Carmel provides well" remarked Sudha. "She will not be some polo-player. Plus, we need the house. You know after retirement we will need a place to stay in. With the house-prices going up and up, by that time we will never be ever able to afford it. Leave this DPS thing. It is not practical."

Suresh understood she was correct. He turned away from her, and leaned against the balcony parapet, looking deeply at the reddening sun. Behind him, Sudha busied herself by clearing Ami's homework books from the dining table. Vividh Bharati played some Hindi music from an old Murphy music system.

Timidly, little Ami spoke, "Mummy, what is 'practical?'"

Hearing her, Suresh turned and called Ami to himself. With difficulty and in simple language he explained that she could not go to the promised 'big school'. For a while, Suresh felt as he had lost connection with the eyes that could speak louder than any voice.

But suddenly they danced in a joyous abandon as her lips parted into a grin, "I can take part as Queen in our school play this year," she laughed. And saying this, skipped away to her room. Suresh saw her go, a lump in his throat.

In the background Vividh Bharati's world news bulletins proclaimed that some country South Yemen's President Ali Nasser Mohammad purged their Politburo; a civil war had broken out between factions of the current President and a formerly exiled premier Abdul Fatteh Ismail; it had led to heavy casualties that day.

That evening little Ami, half a year past her sixth birthday, made her first sacrifice, and learnt the first lesson of life - practicality!

### **Chapter Three**

Riya Gupta was born on a scorching July afternoon. Her delivery was unexpected and sudden, advanced by a month. Her mother Aruna Gupta was at a Ladies Club party, enjoying a game of flash. It was a wild session, and she was losing severely. But it didn't matter. At twenty five, Aruna knew that she had to enjoy life to the hilt before getting tied down to mother-hood responsibilities. With her husband, Dr. Kishore Gupta she had toured the world - the increasing photo album stack in the drawing room were proof of their visits: holding hands at Eiffel Tower, hugging in Venice's gondolas, a peck on the cheek at Athens's Mt. Likabitos, laughing over Thames' waters, scared at a Disney joyride, lying over tulip beds in Holland, waving at Netherland's windmills and throwing snow at Swiss Alps.

After all these exotic visits, it was ironical that her husband chose a two-year contract at a place no one would imagine even existed. But South Yemen was a destination that they headed to, even as the country settled to an uneasy ceasefire with its northern sister early in March that year. Even though it was only two years since President Ismail was in power, it was clear that the country had not seen the last of its unrests!

Settling into the sleepy capital town of Aden wasn't easy for Aruna. After the fast Mumbai life, this wasn't something she had bargained for. She would often complain and crib to her husband. But he would only reply with, 'It's the money. Two years here, and we will have our own clinic in Bombay'. South Yemen imported goods from several countries, but the first choice of professionals was from India.

At the card party, feeling the unexpected movement within her, Aruna let out a groan. Immediately, all women dropped the cards and looked at her, with their finely shaped brows raised. "It's the pain I think" she offered demurely. It was a dream for Aruna that when the pains came on, she should be surrounded by people. There was no point in suffering if there was no one to watch it. And it looked God had answered her prayers. This was a perfect

audience. Like a staged drama, all women at once started their 'oohs' and 'aahs'. Aruna relished the attention.

She was driven to the hospital by Mrs. Sharma, the Indian Ambassador's wife. As the air-conditioned Mercedes zipped over the streets of Khormaksar, a posh residential colony, she turned back to see her friend wriggling in pain and screaming at the top of her lungs at regular intervals. For a brief instant, Mrs. Sharma thought that Aruna would deliver in her car. Hell, what does one do when a woman gives birth to a baby in your car? The airlines probably give a lifetime ticket free. Would she have to give Aruna a lifetime of free petrol? Another groan broke her reverie, and Mrs. Sharma reprimanded herself for thinking inane thoughts. But then, it was at such acutely nervous moments that her mind would wander off to insane thoughts.

"Are you ok?" she asked Aruna.

Aruna smiled. "Of course! I feel it traveling down. It is such a nice feeling, no?" she replied coyly, and then let a small wince escape her lips, which - if there had been a third member in the car - could have seen on Mrs. Sharma's visage. She was a mother of two kids, but had never really felt her babies 'travelling down'. "Hope they have the visas correct," she wanted to quip, but kept quiet.

Seeing the upcoming hospital drive-way she heaved a sigh. With her hand on her horn, she skidded to a halt in front of the gate. Hearing the rush, Yemeni guards standing called for the stretcher. Two dilapidated boys walked outward with a dirty stained stretcher.

Mrs. Sharma helped moaning Aruna onto it; for a second she thought that the boys would not be able to carry the weight. But, she was wrong. Despite their thinness, they had enough strength. She hurried beside them. From a corner, a nurse called out, 'Ali, Zafar!' and hurled a set of orders. To her astonishment, the boys dropped the stretcher immediately. Even though it wasn't exactly dropping it, but to Mrs. Sharma it felt so, and as if on cue Aruna gave out a loud scream.

"But what about her," Mrs Sharma shouted at the boys, who were rushing to where the nurse was, some sort of an ante-room.

"You take care of her" one boy swung back and flung the advice in accented English, and disappeared.

Mrs. Sharma's jaws dropped, perhaps on Aruna who gave out a desperate groan followed by choicest expletives in Hindi. "Damn it, this is real," said Aruna. Mrs Sharma cocked her brows and narrowed her eyes - yes, this seemed more real. All sense of propriety gone! She looked around desperately at the empty and cold stone reception area. Seeing a nurse flitting in, she pounced at her and demanded Aruna be taken to the maternity ward.

It took Mrs. Sharma another five minutes to call for Dr. Gupta, who had just got free from an operation. He came rushing, still in his blue overalls.

"But *jaanu*, it is not due for a month," he told Aruna.

"Dammit, try telling that to your kid!" retorted his wife, exasperated.

Mrs. Sharma chuckled in the background.

It took a quarter of an hour more for Dr. Gupta to arrange for his wife's delivery at the maternity ward. And another half an hour before the wriggly Riya entered the world, howling

and flailing her miniature arms. *She goes after her mother*, thought Mrs. Sharma when the baby girl was brought out, still crying, to be taken to the nursery for post-delivery ablutions.

Aruna insisted on five-day hospital recuperation even though Dr. Gupta insisted that it was not required and she was hale enough to return home. ‘Why don’t you deliver a child and see?’ quipped Aruna, and primly lay on the bed, as a couple from her social circle entered the room. She loved the attention, and anyone who came was subjected to the story of how callous the hospital staff was to her.

On the sixth day, Riya entered her posh home in the up-market Khormaksar area: a huge three-bedroom flat, with a broad view of Aden’s arterial road from the bedrooms on the back side. Despite her obvious discomfort at the added responsibility, Aruna’s instinct did not betray her. Riya’s initial care was lavish and money was well spent to ensure she got the best.

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Kishore Gupta renewed his contract. This place suited him. Or rather, it suited his urge to earn money. The cost of living was much less compared to Bombay, plus there was less work. Another important motivation was the respect he earned with the hospital circles. He beamed with pride when he was nominated for conventions and seminars and asked for advice at every possible instance. To him, it was no less than a power. And he wielded it enough to negotiate an unbelievably high salary for his next term; and an extended duration - six years! Though Aruna was initially displeased at the decision, she also didn’t mind the extra money coming in. At the end of the year, they took another round the world trip - this time to the Far East. More albums joined the mountainous pile in their drawing room: a shot before Hanuman Dhoka temple in Nepal, a pose on Great Wall of China, another peck in front of a pagoda temple in Bangkok, a smile at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. In all these, little Riya smiled blissfully - well, they didn’t take a photograph till she was beaming, which she did rarely.

In the need to get the money, Kishore and Aruna had forgotten one vital fact, which hit them hard when Riya turned four. There was no school worth its name in Aden that could befit their stature. An apology called International School did exist, but it only brought a horrific expression on Aruna’s face, “That school! Half the teachers are bored housewives or daughters from the Embassy. Chhheee! And it has classes for English speaking students in the noon!” She rounded her pert nose, and looked away. “You know that Mrs. Shukla teaches there. Bitch!” Kishore very well knew about his wife’s envy for the more educated and more chic Mrs. Shukla. He had spent enough time in front of Hongkong’s malls waiting for Aruna to buy ample stock of designer labels and cosmetics so that she could show it off to Mrs. Shukla at the next Ladies Club Party!

“So?” asked Kishore.

So? Aruna was not really given to think about solutions. “That” she averred time and again, “was the job of the man of house! And I certainly don’t wear the pants in mine!” She gave her stock reply, turned towards the guest list for another up-coming party at their place. Even though they entertained guests once-a-month, this was a special occasion. It was Riya’s 4<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Kishore met the Dean next morning. “No way!” hollered the grumpy Yemeni, Dr. Tayeb. “There are three more years to the contract. But there is a clause wherein you can break it by paying a small charge”

Kishore hurrumped an inaudible reply. He knew the clause, and he knew the penalty. And he was not going to do it. It was just initial education, and Riya would have to do with the International School; and so would Aruna, despite her jealousy for Mrs. Shukla and her piped

voice. Inwardly, Kishore lamented at the situation's irony - he had the money to spend, but didn't have the facility to spend it on.

Riya was a precocious child. Her inability to stick to one thing irritated Aruna. Due to this, she always had to be on her toes to keep the baby entertained. But Aruna would pride in the beauty that was evident even at that young age. It was a mix of her own flawless complexion with those lovely deep brown eyes and perfect shaped nose from her husband, to which she had been attracted at the time of their marriage.

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The Indian Association in Aden, presided by Subhash Arora, was an active force in the city. With a large Indian (or Indian-decent) population, membership was huge. They organized fests and fetes, along with the obvious Republic Day and Independence Day functions. Even though Subhash Arora was the president, chosen through democratic franchise, the honorary Chairman's post was reserved for the Indian Ambassador. The Indian Association was also responsible for the preservation of the few Hindu temples that existed in the otherwise totally Muslim country. The most famous was Mata Mandir in Crater, an area formed atop a small hillock, rumored to be a dead volcano, and hence the name. Crater was the shopping area, and most shops belonged to Gujaratis who had come there during the time when Aden was a British Protectorate. Due to its strategic location on the tip of Arabian Peninsula, Aden was a vantage halt point for ships proceeding to Bombay and Madras. The British had left their unmistakable stamp here too, more so in the port area of Tawahi.

At Crater, the Association maintained a large building - Gandhi Hall - primarily a large hall with open garden in front; there was a small library on the first floor. There they organized their functions and fetes.

On Indian Independence Day, 15<sup>th</sup> August there was a singing and dancing competition for young children, along with a spew of cultural events. Visiting Minister of Foreign Affairs would be the judge. Preparations were on in full swing. The entire building was lighted up and decked like a bride. For many days prior to the function, Subhash Arora could be seen running about there daily, barking orders and fretting and fuming and largely doing nothing. His voice was forever raised, like his blood pressure and his shiny bald dome covered in a sticky film of perspiration. In August, Aden's humidity was at its peak.

Riya was participating in the show. And all through the fortnight before it, Aruna made insidious enquiries in her group to gauge competition for her. She laughed off Mrs Shukla's spectacled son as too small to worry. But Mrs. Malhotra's (the current Ambassador's wife) daughters were formidable. Arpita and Anara had had classical training while in India. Riya had none, and Aruna was relying on the various Bollywood videos as her source of education.

"It's just a show," remarked Dr Kishore, seeing Aruna wringing her hand in despair when Riya could not get the simple Sridevi steps correct. "It's not the question of winning, it's the participation that matters"

"That's the line for losers," retorted Aruna, and turned her attention to the VCR, rewinding the exact sequence and shouting at Riya, "Watch it carefully now!"

Kishore raised his hands in despair. "Don't trouble the child too much. Heavens will not fall if she loses"

Aruna turned towards him, her eyes flashing in fury. "Heavens will fall if she loses. And mind you Kishore, don't even talk about that. She will not lose. She cannot lose."



Kishore eyed her silently, a small fear creeping in his heart.

That night Aruna crept into Riya's room; the child was awake, scared and sensed that her mother had come to scold her. She had tried to follow the steps, but Sridevi seemed to be superhuman in her dance. What the little child, and Aruna, did not realize was that the actress had been considerably aided by an helpful editor, who joined several pieces of film together to what they saw on screen.

"Riya my baby," began Aruna, sitting on the bed's edge, but immediately stopped as she saw the girl was shivering. In the dark, she touched Riya's face, it was wet.

"Sorry, mummy" said Riya in between sobs.

Aruna pulled her towards her bosom, and hugged her tightly. "Arre beta, nothing to cry. We still have time to rehearse. And I am sure tomorrow you will get it correct." Even though she didn't realize it there was grittiness as she spoke the last line. "But beta, you have to know how important every competition is. See, its not a question of participating alone - if you are doing it, there is no point in being there if you don't win the trophy," she stroked her daughter's head tenderly, who clung to her shivering. "Just imagine, you are there on the stage, with all our friends standing and cheering; you are in that flowing white dress which I have made specially for you, and the announcement is made - 'Winner is Riya Gupta' ; you will be handed over a trophy by the Minister. You know who this man is? He is the super-boss of Arpita and Anara's father."

Riya's sobbing subsided; the dream was in her eyes too. She was on stage, and yes she will bow down with just a petite bend of knees, as she had seen ballet dancers do on the Russian-imported shows on the local channel.

"Yes mummy," she whispered, her eyes droopy with sleep, but her mind fully awake. That night Riya got her life's first dream.

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"No, Mrs. Shukla," said Aruna, "I will take care and not send Riya to school today" She raised her eyebrows in disgust and placed the receiver at a distance from her ears - why did that stupid woman have to scream?

With minimal pleasantries, she hit the receiver, disconnecting the call and immediately dialed the hospital.

"I haven't heard anything," said Kishore, distractedly from the other end.

"I know, but this Mrs. Shukla can be so irritating - at the smallest thing she will panic. She was talking about civil war," said Aruna.

"Ok...now you calm down and don't fret. If there is anything I will come back home," informed Kishore.

Thoughtfully Aruna placed back the receiver. She sat in the hall, at an ornate writing desk. Her heart beat fast. She did not like the country, and had been hearing about the worsening political situation. Mrs. Shukla better be wrong this time, but somewhere deep within she knew that the teacher had often been correct in the past. Distractedly, she looked across the room at the showcase - Riya's trophy held a proud place; she had won the dance competition with a comfortable margin.

Not wanting to wait, Aruna picked up the phone yet again. This time she dialed the Indian Ambassador's residence. There was no answer for a while. Aruna was tempted to keep the phone down. Mrs Malhotra was vastly different from her predecessor. She was reserved and quiet lady; and rarely attended any kitty or club parties, unless it was extremely necessary due to her position as the wife of Indian Ambassador.

The phone was answered after several rings. "Kavita here."

"Oh hello Mrs. Malhotra," said Aruna, a bit flustered at the calm tone from the other end. Suddenly she found Mrs. Shukla's high-pitch preferable - that was home turf where she could always score. "This is Aruna Gupta here - Dr. Kishore's wife"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Gupta, how are you?"

"Perfect. Just wanted to check - is there a trouble brewing somewhere? Mrs. Shukla had called in advising not to send Riya to school today"

There was a second's silence before the composed static voice resumed through the receiver, "Yes there is. I am not allowed to say much, but Mr. Malhotra had also called up to say that there are possibilities of some rallies or revolt today in town. Even Anara and Arpita are not going to school. But I don't think there is any cause for overt worry. Is there anything else?"

Aruna was taken aback at the curt last sentence. Ordinarily, she was prone to move on to other topics with ladies - perhaps discuss Riya's win and the effort put in by her to get the coveted trophy, even though five months had passed and there was a dull layer of dust on the golden statuette now.

She thanked Kavita Malhotra and placed the receiver, letting out a sigh. Maybe she was worrying too much. She was about to get up from the desk when Riya excitedly skipped into the room, her eyes wide, her face red and her breath furious.

"Mummy - tanks!"

Aruna rushed to Riya's room, and looked out with horror as large olive-green tanks rolled in their weighty crawl.

13<sup>th</sup> January 1986 - civil war started in Aden, fought on the town streets and lasting for a blood-filled fourteen days!

## **Chapter Four**

In three years time Ami Mehrotra graduated from the chorus to being the lead singer in school's junior choir. At same time, Ami found an interest in numbers. Arithmetic attracted her. It kept her hooked to find that the same answer could be found from various sources - two plus three was five, but so was one plus four. For her it was like her home, where everything fell into place with an utmost precision. Routine and habit were her playmates - and arithmetic was just an extension of the same.

