

Meeting

The Year 1990

The night faded away. Deepti sat on the balcony of Sagar's apartment, which he shared with a friend. The apartment on the second floor wasn't too different from the one she had run away from. And although it wasn't as neat as hers, it looked neater than she had expected from a bachelor pad. She wasn't sure which of the two tenants was the reason behind this aberration, but she didn't care. She wanted to get out of here as soon as possible. This man had already helped her enough. She didn't want to be a burden on him now.

Vehicles had slowly started to trickle onto the road outside, interlacing the humming of their engines with the chirps of the early morning birds. But Deepti's mind had not found its peace yet, not even hours after she had run away from her abuser. She had barely slept the night, tossing and turning all the time on the makeshift bed that Sagar had set up for her on the couch in his living room, struggling to fight her worry of an uncertain future. Her friend Sandhya, whose bungalow she had been to last night, was her only hope. She didn't have any other friends. She didn't have anyone else. What will she do now? Where will she go?

The train of her thoughts was interrupted when Sagar appeared next to her. "Tea, Ma'am?"

He pulled the small table lying on the balcony closer to her and placed the tea tray on it. He looked up at her face and asked, "You are a medical researcher. Financially independent, I believe. So, what took you so long to part?"

Deepti thought how, after her parents had died, she had longed for only one thing. There were people who talked to her, but nobody listened to her. She

needed emotional support. People gave her sympathy. Career gave her financial confidence, but no inner peace. She needed someone to be by her side. Anyone. Such was her desperation that, despite all the hurt and humiliation she faced from her husband, she stayed put. She had no one else, and she was afraid of being alone. She knew at her core that she should have left her husband years ago, but the fear of having no one hollowed her soul and self-love. She also didn't know when Rohit had changed so much.

But she couldn't tell Sagar this.

It was evident in his question that he thought of her weak. She couldn't fall any lower in the eyes of this man. "I don't know," was all she could manage to reply, and before he found something else to point out as her weakness, she quickly added, "Don't worry. I'll go back to that place today. In Vasant Vihar. Maybe they were asleep last night."

"Are you sure, now?"

"Yes. My friend, Sandhya, is a lawyer. She will help me apply for a divorce." Deepti hoped that Sagar had heard at least some determination in her voice.

He picked up the tray, stood up, and said, "You can stay here until you find a place."

Just then, her mobile rotated on the table. She quickly picked up her cell. As she saw the phone screen, her face turned red, and her hands trembled.

Sagar noticed a few drops of sweat on her temple. He returned to her side and whispered, "It's not nice to live in fear. It will kill you."

In that moment, Deepti felt exposed, as if her inner world—the one she had carefully hidden behind layers of composure—had been stripped bare. She'd been living in fear for so long that she had forgotten what it was to live without fear.

How could she explain the fear that claws at her from the inside, the feeling that whispers – how will his mood be? She never safe, even in her quietest moments. Her body tightened trying to hold onto the thing imprisoning her.

Part of her wanted to lash out, defend herself, and say, "You don't understand." But her heart knew that Sagar was right. Thoughts churned, and a battle ensued within her between the fear and the fragile hope that maybe—just maybe—*there was a way out*. It was this determination that gave her strength last night to sneak out of her abusive comfort zone. She wanted to believe it was possible; change was possible, but fear had a louder voice at that moment.

It didn't take her long after that to collect herself. Later that day, she went to her institute and applied for fifteen days of leave. Then, she went to Civil Lines, near Delhi University, to her husband's house and left an envelope for her husband at the doorstep.

She felt light. After three years of marital slavery, she was finally happy. Like any other woman, Deepti gambled everything except her career and her dream to save her marriage, while her husband, a chartered accountant, valued everything else in his life except her. He failed to see that relationships can't be built on authority. That love means loving what the other person wants, not forcing them to love what they like.

She knew that love should be open and light and not suffocating. Not the way she felt with her husband. He was always doubting, always frustrated and short-tempered. Not ready to adjust one bit rather mould everyone to his liking. He did the same to Deepti, to the point she was starting to forget who she was and her own identity. Her life revolved around him. Only her work kept her sane. For three years after her marriage to Rohit, she could finally gather the strength to snap all ties.

Three years! It was hell.
