A PALACE OF MEMORIES

"Think about it. How far would you go for love?"

Lila's head buzzed as the words echoed around her. She rubbed at her temples, squirming as the broken air-conditioning streamed onto that one spot on her freezing forearm. The phone slid from her ear, and she did a mad scramble to catch it before it fell on the filthy floor again. Beside her, Naveen frowned as he tried to make sense of the ancient navigation system that rebooted every ten kilometres and tried to insist Corundum Palace was all the way up in Whitefields, Hyderabad.

"Wrong one," he muttered. "Lila, can you switch the destination? It's pointing us to that mall in Hyderabad again."

The salesperson droned on in Lila's ear. "A lovely lady like yourself must have a husband and kids. Imagine their lives if something were to happen to you. We have to take care of the people we love."

Lila mentally rehearsed her reply before speaking. "I'm sorry. It's not in our budget at the moment. We have medical insurance, and that works-"

On cue, he interrupted quickly, "Medical insurance can only get you so far, Ma'am. Besides, those companies can be notoriously picky about what and how much they cover. Our life insurance policy, on the other hand..."

Nodding in polite agreement with the man on the phone who couldn't see her, Lila reached over to the screen in a practiced move and tapped in their destination. Corundum Palace, 5 Harbour Road, Chennai. Her fingers faltered as her stomach clenched tightly. Leaning back in resignation, she tugged the seatbelt away from her body, giving her chest a bit more room to breathe.

"... Shall I sign you up for the Silver Package? It's our most popular one. In fact, I'll let you in on a secret. The company loses money with that one. I am fully on our customers' side, and that is why I'm-"

"Sorry, I can't-" Lila drew in a sharp breath as her stomach rebelled against her forced calm, and her hand shot out automatically to grip Naveen's arm. She didn't have to look at him to know the precise mix of annoyance and panic painting his face red. He pulled over to the side of the road and yanked the phone away from her. Lila released it easily enough, hurriedly covering her mouth as bile rose in her throat.

"We don't want your bloody insurance, man. Stop calling, and take us off your list," he snapped and cut the call.

"Sorry," Lila mumbled and wrenched herself out of the car rapidly. It was almost here. Inhaling deeply, she tried to subdue the rising wave of vomit. She knew it was futile to control it, but she couldn't bring herself not to try. Doubled over on the side of the road with Naveen rubbing her back and whispering calm into her nerves, one question drummed against Lila's head, fighting for space amongst the nausea.

How do I save you?