

## Prologue

Ramana had his face to the barred window, looking ahead as the train pulled into Bangalore station. It reminded him of summer vacations, travelling to grandparents' homes and sunlit days. This time, however, he was only meeting his sister for a few minutes at the station platform.

Yet again, he wondered whether it had been the right move - telling Sowmya that his train was passing through Bangalore - would she like to meet up? They hadn't spoken in six months.

Until now, when he's set up this meeting at the station. And there was Sowmya, grinning from ear to ear, waving at him, beginning to walk towards where his bogie would stop.

The train halted with a jerk. A fair number of people were getting off here. They crowded the passage with their luggage. Raman sidestepped a few aluminium trunks and brightly coloured suitcases and reached the platform.

Sowmya reached him a moment later and gave him a hug. She looked happy, if a little tired. "How are you, Anna?" she asked.

He patted her cheek. "I'm fine, Sumi. How have you been?"

"Surviving." She said. "It's been a long time since anyone called me Sumi."

Despite himself, Ramana felt a current of annoyance. It was her own fault that her family was not talking to her.

Oblivious of his reaction, Sowmya continued to chat happily. "It's been so lonely here, I've missed you and Appa-Amma. I'll never turn my nose up at Amma's cooking again!"

"You could always come back home if you miss us so much."

The smile faded from her face. "Not again, Anna. You know why I left. Do you want me to waste my life looking for a government job? Just because Appa thinks a salesgirl's job is below his dignity, none of you are talking to me now."

Ramana looked away in annoyance. The crowds milled around them, uncaring. Here and there a few people paused to look at them. A man in a white shirt and pants - probably a cab driver - leaned idly against a pillar a few yards away and watched them. "That isn't why and you know it. Appa was only disappointed, not angry, when you came here to take the job.

"But then you went off and married someone you just met - and you're telling us about it after it's all done. Marriage is a big commitment, Sumi. It takes time for two people to understand each

other, for the families to know each other, and -”

“Appa was just angry because Iqbal is a muslim!”

Ramana shook his head. “Look, I don’t want to get into the same arguments again and again. You came to Bangalore a year ago, married six months later, and after the argument with Appa, you haven’t talked to anyone at home. No one’s going to chase you away if you and your husband -”

“You can say his name, you know.”

“Right. You and Iqbal are welcome to come home any time.”

“After all the things that Appa yelled at me? I don’t think so. He’s probably parading up and down the verandah with a gun, waiting for us.”

Ramana smiled bitterly. “His parading days are done.”

“What do you mean?”

“Appa didn’t want me to tell you. He had a stroke last month and his left leg’s paralyzed. He’s bedridden now.”

Her hands had flown up to her face. A tear glinted in her eye.

After a moment she said, “Well, then, can you talk to them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ask them to call us home. If Appa calls, we’ll come visit.”

“Are you serious?” Ramana’s voice rose. “These are your parents, too! Do you need any invitation to go to your own home?”

Sowmya looked down at her feet. “They won’t listen to me. They’ll listen to you.”

Raman felt the rage growing. “You mean you’re too frightened and too adamant to try and fix the situation, right? It’s the same story every time. Anna, tell them that I haven’t cleared the exams. Anna, tell them that I spent all the money. Anna, tell them I want to go to Bangalore!”

She was still looking away.

“Look, Sumi, the least you owe your family is honesty, and admitting to your mistakes. No one is

going to punish you, we all love you.”

But she shook her head. “They never listen to me. They’ll listen to you. They always listen to you.”

“That’s because I really try to persuade them. When I wanted to move to Delhi you remember Amma didn’t like the idea. I talked to them, many times, to convince them. What you do is announce what you’ve already decided.”

She looked balefully up at him. “Easy for you to say. You kept them happy with good marks in school and college, and now that you’re famous they’ll just agree with everything you say.”

“Famous? Where did that come from?”

“You caught those Pakistani hackers, didn’t you? Just a month after you left for Delhi. You should have seen Appa’s face that day, as if his dear son had conquered Pakistan all by himself.”

Ramana let out an exasperated sigh. “It was a joint operation by our department, and it was just one mention in one newspaper. That’s what our department does, it’s just a... But how does that matter? You’re changing the topic.”

But Sowmya was crying now. “It’s always the same... Ramana is our good son, he never argues, he studies hard... Sowmya can’t do anything right, Sowmya is an idiot...”

“That’s not true...” He reached out to hug her, but she pushed him away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the cab driver still staring at them. Something about him seemed familiar.

An announcement boomed out of the public address system. The acoustics of the place garbled the words, but Ramana could make out that his train was getting ready to leave. Ashamed at himself for feeling relieved, he stepped back. “My train’s about to leave.”

She nodded, tears still rolling down her cheeks. “We always end up fighting, don’t we?”

He put a hand to her cheek, wiped away a tear with his thumb. “I’ll try and talk to Appa, put in a word about you.” Both of them knew he wouldn’t. He never had.

The train was shambling along now. He walked away towards the door of the bogie and pushed his way in, past the last-minute farewells. By the time he’d reached his seat and looked out, Sowmya was far away. But she was not alone.

The cab driver was hugging her. Ramana cursed silently. He should have guessed. He put out his arm and waved at them as the train moved out of the station, but they never looked towards

him.

Iqbal took out his handkerchief and wiped Sowmya's face. She hugged him closer, burying her face into Iqbal's white shirt. "He never understands how hard things are for me."

He didn't say anything for a moment. Then, almost to himself, he murmured, "They don't deserve to see you ever again."