Chapter 1

NISHA

New York, New York, Earth

It always started with a stillness.

Nisha's senses modulated the surroundings in an attempt to sharpen her focus. Her vision dampened to a narrow tunnel of curved lines and the world muted into nothing more than an indistinguishable hum. In exchange, her other senses kicked into overdrive. The unforgiving sun burned her skin. Her fingers seared against the asphalt.

Fifty-two seconds to victory. Nothing more.

The deafening crack of the pistol shattered the quiet. Adrenaline surged into Nisha's veins and she exploded off the starting block. She accelerated. Desperation drove her forward. And as the heat from the sun gave way to the burn in her lungs, she saw it. The end. Maybe even victory. She left nothing behind. Time slowed as she pushed herself almost beyond the capacity of her body.

Her senses returned her to a state of stillness as she crossed the line, tearing through the ribbon. The numbers flashed and for a fraction of a second, the universe held its breath.

Fifty-three seconds.

The universe exhaled. The crowd roared. And Nisha crashed. Her knees buckled and slammed into the track. She pressed her face into her palms to muffle a scream.

Hands gripped her shoulders, pulling her up, maneuvering her to the sideline.

"You won."

She shook her head, refusing to look at her coach. "Fifty-three seconds."

"I know. You're fine. Remember, this is not a qualifier."

She pulled away. Her eyes burned but she refused to let tears spill. It was unacceptable. Three years of training and sacrifice for the chance to qualify for the national team tryouts and she continued to fall short.

Friends and families of other sprinters poured onto the track. Teammates patted her back and congratulated her while she stood with only her coach at her side, the defeated winner. "I just…I need to go."

"We've talked about this. You have to stay for the medals."

Nisha bit back a retort. Did she want to force a smile on her face for a track full of strangers? For an unsuccessful outcome? Definitely not. But after one too many reprimands about her lack of sportsmanship, she knew better than to argue.

“Fine.” She glanced at her watch. “But I can’t stay long.”

“You are not headed to the gym,” he said, his voice poised to chide her.

She had a habit of punishing herself at the gym after a failed race. And that’s exactly where she wanted to disappear to now. Instead, she had to head uptown to her mother’s apartment because her grandmother insisted on giving her a sari for her cousin’s wedding tomorrow.

“I can’t. I need to pick something up from my grandmother.” As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

“That’s good,” he said, his annoyance turning into a surprised smile.

In the last three years, not a single member of her family had attended a meet. She never bothered to explain their absence, not wanting to open herself to that level of vulnerability. But what felt like a sneaker rubbing against a nasty blister then was all but callused over now.

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The post race obligations took longer than necessary. She barely had time to shower before trekking up to Morningside Heights. She wrapped her damp hair into a tight bun. Her black curls would morph into a mess of frizz as they dried but she couldn’t risk taking the time to style them. She would rather endure her grandmother’s criticism about her appearance than chance crossing paths with her mother.

She turned a corner into the familiar tree-lined street of pre-war buildings. When she reached her mother’s building, she snuck in behind a resident and sprinted up the stairs to avoid small talk in the elevator. The faint sound of classical Tamil music drifted from Apartment 6B. She held down the doorbell, knowing it would take her grandmother a minute to notice.

“You have keys,” her grandmother said as she let her into the living room. Shelves grazed the crown molding of the cream walls, overburdened with books on etymology and ancient languages and brass oil lamps. In the corner by the window was a deflated evergreen loveseat. As a child, Nisha would curl up on the sofa, tucked into her mother’s side while she graded papers and quizzed Nisha on her knowledge of Sanskrit or Dravidian languages.

The sweet scent of rose incense wafted through the room. Tendrils of smoke danced over the photos on the mantel by the couch. Pictures of Nisha and her baby sister at various ages. A framed photo from her high school graduation. Photos of her mother and stepfather on their wedding day. And a family photo in the center—one without her own father—the last photo of Nisha with her mother, just weeks before Nisha had walked away.

“It’s in my apartment somewhere,” Nisha lied. The keys to her mother’s place had never left her keychain but she refused to use them. This wasn’t her home anymore.
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“Fine, fine, take off those dirty shoes.” She swept her eyes over Nisha, tutting her tongue and shaking her head. “Look at you. Have you been running in the sun again? At this rate you’ll be darker than your periyappa in Jaffna. You could have at least avoided the sun until after Meena’s wedding. You might meet a suitable man there.”

Perfectly on cue. If it wasn’t unkept hair, it was her complexion or her status as a single woman. At least her grandmother avoided criticizing her about her career aspirations. She left that to her daughter, Nisha’s mother.

“Ammahma! You can’t say things like that,” her sister said from behind her grandmother. “Nisha is beautiful.”

Of course, her ten year-old sister with her light brown skin came to her aid. She didn’t need defending. She wasn’t going to dodge the sun for some archaic standard of beauty. With or without the sun, her skin was a deep brown color and Nisha wouldn’t have it any other way.

Her sister flung herself at her. “Did you have a race? Did you win?”

“Hi Abhi,” Nisha said, wrapping her arms around her. “I did.”

She beamed. “Come! I want to show you my new pavadai.”

She followed Abhi into the bedroom that she had once been hers. A two-piece skirt and blouse in green and fuchsia lay neatly on the twin bed. Gold borders embellished the pavadai, the standard wedding outfit for little Tamil girls.

“You’ll look perfect in it,” Nisha said.

“I helped mom pick out your sari. You have to see it! Mom said it’s special because it’s your first one.”

Nisha shifted and pressed the pads of her fingers against her thighs to mask her discomfort. She had thought her grandmother was lending her one from her own collection.

Her grandmother hushed her youngest granddaughter and ushered them into her room. “Come now, let me show you how to drape the sari. I’ll pin the pleats to make it easier.”

The powder pink sari was dotted in delicate gold foil print with a thin embroidered scallop border. The accompanying blouse had a sweetheart neckline and wide straps that tapered in. Nisha ran her fingers over the yards of organza. She bit the inside of her cheek, staunching tears from welling. Her mother had perfectly honored her preferences and Nisha couldn’t even honor her with her presence.

Nisha hadn’t spoken to her mom in any substantive way in three years. Not since the accident with Abhi. Hurtful words were exchanged. Whether it was due to Nisha’s anger at her mother or her own shame for her actions, Nisha couldn’t bring herself to reconcile with her mother.

Abhi chattered away about school and her friends while her grandmother maneuvered Nisha in and then out of the sari, rattling off instructions that Nisha would never remember. She would resort to finding a video online tomorrow.

"Before you leave, I have one more item for you," her grandmother said as Nisha packed the delicate sari into her duffle bag.

She picked up a small jewelry box from her dresser, caressing the red velvet. "These have belonged to the eldest woman of every generation of our family. Passed down when she wears her first sari. In Sri Lanka, you would have worn a sari years ago but at least we're here now."

She held it out. Abhi peered up on her toes. Nisha froze, eyes locked on the box. The sari was already too much.

"I can't." Her words struggled to escape her parched throat. She spun on her heels, desperate to swallow her regret down with some ice water. With the duffle bag slung over her shoulder, she stumbled out of the room and into the kitchen. She grabbed a glass and shoved it under the water dispenser.

"Kanna," her grandmother said. Nisha flinched at the undeserved term of endearment. "Come, sit down." Hands guided her to the kitchen table. It was perhaps the softest her grandmother had ever acted. Abhi slid into a chair beside her.

"Why are you upset?" Abhi asked.

Nisha's lips twitched but she failed to hold a smile. "I'm not."

Her grandmother pushed the box to her. "Take it. *Please*."

"I don't want it." She didn't *deserve* it. She tightened her grip on the glass of water.

"It is yours." Her grandmother peeled the glass from her fingers, snapped open the box and it in her hand.

The moment it was in her palm, any further protests fell away. The content of the box now demanded her full attention. As if under a spell, a profound stillness settled over her once more. The hum of the refrigerator, the ever-present aroma of tamrind and chili powder, and the chill of the air conditioner on her skin, all faded into the background.

Nestled inside were a pair of antique jimikki earrings. The tarnished gold alloy radiated an ethereal reddish-gold sheen. The domes, adorned with rows of gems and intricate motifs of lotuses and conch shells, hung gracefully from teardrop-shaped sapphire studs framed in diamond encrusted metal. Her fingers drew them out from their cushion. With each movement, tiny pearls suspended from the rims of the domes tinkled, like the soft, rhythmic pitter-patter of rain against tin.

"They belonged to mom? I've never seen her wear them?" Abhi said.

The enchantment broke. The sounds and smells of the kitchen rushed back, assaulting her senses. Nisha gasped. “What happened?”

“Your ammah wore them on the most special of occasions,” her grandmother said to Abhi before turning to Nisha. “Are you okay?”

Nisha’s fingers twitched and she blinked at her grandmother and Abhi, dragging herself from the haze, where only the earrings mattered. She dropped them back into the cushioned box before they entranced her again.

“She wore them when she married your dad.”

“She wore them when she married your father too, Nisha.”

Abhi leaned forward. “Can I touch them?”

Their grandmother nodded. Abhi beamed and gently placed the earrings in her palms, bringing them close to her nose. Nisha tensed, ready to snap Abhi out of it if she got lost in the earrings. Abhi held them up to her eyes, bouncing on her seat as she usually did when she was excited. “Wow, they’re so pretty.”

Nisha relaxed and took a sip of water. She must of imagined it. They were nothing more than a family antique. She turned to her grandmother and switched to Tamil. “I can’t accept them.”

“You are not going to break with a *centuries old* tradition for this petty grudge of yours,” her grandmother responded in Tamil.

“Aren’t we already breaking with tradition? Isn’t this passed down from mother to daughter.”

“And who’s fault is it that your ammah can’t give them to you?”

Her chest tightened. “She rejected me.”

“She didn’t. She said things in anger. You cannot hold her to it forever.”

“Please, Nisha,” Abhi said. Both women looked down at her. Abhi’s eyes glistened. “Don’t make mom sad.”

Nisha flinched. She wished she had never come for the sari. She could have borrowed something from a classmate or worn a dress. But instead, here she was, hurting her sister…again.

“Abhi…” she started. “Wait, did you understand what we were saying?” She had purposely switched to Tamil to spare her sister the details.

“Of course.”

“When did you start learning Tamil?” Nisha said.

“I mean, I know a little. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“We were speaking in Tamil,” their grandmother said.

Abhi scrunched her nose and sniffed. “No you weren’t. You were speaking English!” Abhi placed the earring back in the case and snapped it shut. She held it out to Nisha. “Just take them. *Please*.”

Nisha couldn’t resist her sister. She nodded. Gingerly, she grazed the box, bracing herself. Nothing happened. The refrigerator hummed. The tamarind and chili powder filled her nostrils and the cold air of the AC stung her skin. She placed the box into the front pocket of her duffle bag. “I should go.”

“I’m sorry I got mad,” Abhi whispered. She hung her head and traced her toe along the tiled floor.

Nisha smiled ruefully and pulled Abhi into a hug. “Don’t be.” Whenever she questioned her choices, Nisha needed to remind herself that her mother had Abhi. She was the superior daughter. Her second chance. Abhi would have their mother and she would have her mother’s earrings.

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That night, Nisha laid out the sari on the back of her chair but left the earrings tucked away in the duffle bag. It wasn’t rational, perhaps, but it felt safest.

As the night ticked away, sleep alluded her. In the next room, her roommate argued with her boyfriend over the phone in French. She glanced at her duffle bag.

She huffed and flung back the sheets. She was being ridiculous. She rummaged for the red velvet box. Nothing would happen by holding a pair of earrings. She crawled back into bed and opened the box, laying it beside the glass of water on her bedside table.

She ran her finger over a sapphire. Her roommate had switched to English as she continued to yell at her boyfriend. She took a sip of water, the liquid crisp against her tongue. The pearls glistened under the light of the lamp. Her senses had not dulled. She laughed. She was in total control of her surroundings.

But when she finally fell asleep, she dreamed of a young man she never met. A man with a scarred shoulder, sitting by a window, stretching his arm out into the rain, reaching for the earrings.
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