

Tales from Kalpavriksham

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Book 1: Will of the Goddess

Chapter 1: The Reunion

As Jayaraman walked the stairs leading up, he paused to look at the photograph on his left. It was a black and white photo of his mother as an infant in the arms of his grandmother, who looked like she was trying to whisper something in the baby's soft, tiny ears. For the umpteenth time, Jayaraman tried to convince himself that the baby's face bore some resemblance to his octogenarian mother's, but once again, he failed to see any. He had read somewhere that as people grew old, they started looking like their baby selves.

"Rubbish," he muttered, annoyed that he had let the thought linger in his mind despite its lack of evidence. His relations had all grown old and not a single one resembled their baby self. They all resembled each other though. Except him. He looked different, he was certain. He still had a head full of hair, and enough motivation to wash and comb his flowing beard every day. Everyone else was in varying stages of baldness, with stubbles that looked permanently stuck at the three-day mark.

It made them look like old security guards who had been abandoned by their sons and had to continue working for a living. The women on the other hand had aged better. They still had some black hair, and younger skin, and looked happier. His eldest sister Shobha, edging towards 60, looked the youngest and the most beautiful of the lot – an outcome, no doubt, of drinking coconut water every day. Coconuts grew in abundance on her estate—or her

husband's estate, as Jayaraman liked to point out with passive aggression.

On the upper floor of the house, the first door on the left was where Jayaraman was headed. Inside, his 80-year-old mother Devi was drying her hair with vigorous strokes of an emaciated towel. Even at this age, her arms were strong and Jayaraman was tempted to request a head massage in return for letting her entertain him with some neighbourhood gossip. His temptation was nipped in the bud when Devi snapped at him.

"How hard is it to change a towel? I'm just reading my will today—not dying!"

Jayaraman looked at the towel and could not understand what the fuss was all about. She had used older ones before without complaining, and besides, he had placed a new one right next to her bed. Perhaps the anxiety of having to read the will was making her edgy. He sat down on a chair opposite the bed and scanned the desk next to it for papers. There were none.

"Where's the will, Amma? Can I read it? You know how much I hate surprises. It feels like I'm waiting for exam results—and I already know I've failed."

"Why are you worried? Do you think I'll be unfair to you? I have four children, and yet I chose to live with you. Doesn't that say something?"

"You live with me because I'm your only son. No one else has the patience for you," Jayaraman teased. Devi had ditched the towel and was now combing her hair, occasionally pausing to check how many had broken. On any other day she would have had a response ready in a second, but today she decided to restrain herself. Her uncharacteristic behaviour was not out of concern for her son's feelings, or the admission of truth in his words. She was performing another iteration in her mind about what was the best way to allocate her wealth, and if anyone had

been left out. The lawyer had already registered the will and was probably on his way to their house. Although a polite, middle-aged man, lawyer Somashekhar was loath to redo documents once they had been registered. If anyone had been dealt a poor hand in the will, it would have to stay that way because Mr. Somashekhar would not be pleased.

A knock on the door interrupted Devi's thoughts and crushed any amendments to the will that may have been sprouting in her mind. Her second daughter Aruna had come to check if Devi needed any more coffee. The house was full of visitors and coffee was being prepared round the clock, much to Jayaraman's annoyance. He disliked constant commotion in the house, especially when it was caused by something as inconsequential as tea or coffee.

'This is the third time coffee has been prepared this morning. Do you people drink this much coffee in your own house too?' asked Jayaraman, looking at Aruna.

'What is the problem? Did anyone ask you to prepare it? And I didn't see you refuse any time. Do you want some more?' asked Aruna. Jayaraman accepted another cup of coffee sheepishly. He had to admit that there was something nice about drinking coffee at home without having to prepare it himself. He thanked Aruna and asked her to join them. Aruna sat cross-legged on the bed next to her mother, examining her hair as she combed it. It had been a long time since she had seen her mother up close. A sudden wave of sadness washed over her as she took in how frail her mother had become. In all the family photos from their annual reunions, Devi looked her age—but the collective joy in their smiles blurred the individual signs of aging.

Now without the averaging effect of the photo, Devi's numerous years were starkly evident. Even the way she handled the comb looked alternately affable and pitiable

like a child struggling to use a tool for the first time. Eighty years of life sat next to Aruna, a lifetime of experiences – joys and sorrows, dreams fulfilled and abandoned, struggles overcome and compromised, some shared and some withheld. Now in her fifties, Aruna felt like she was her own mother. They were both old, differing only in degrees of oldness. They both struggled with aching limbs, poor digestion and empty days.

Devi nudged a handful of shelled peanuts into Aruna's palm. "Eat them. They're still crunchy." Devi had always shared whatever she had. She was always the last to eat, the last to bathe with the rationed hot water and the last one whose opinion was asked when it was time to go out for a movie. As she accepted the fistful of shelled peanuts from Devi's wrinkled, saggy hands, Aruna broke into tears and hugged her mother. Devi didn't ask any questions and hugged her back.

"It feels nice to have everyone back in the house. When I came here after my wedding almost 60 years ago, I felt so homesick. I wanted to run away. I couldn't stand the sight of your father and banned him from this room. For many days he slept in the room on the terrace. Can you imagine? That ghostly room that used to scare all of you out of your wits. One day your grandfather found out that he had been sleeping there and that was the end of it."

"Let me call Somashekhar and check where he has reached," interrupted Jayaraman on his way out of the room. He figured it was best to give the mother and daughter their moment. He liked it when they all sat together and laughed about the good old days, but he was uncomfortable when things turned emotional. Growing up he had become increasingly aware of what it meant to be the youngest male child after a succession of female births. For his sisters, he would always be that elusive male child that his father always wanted, while the three

girls were just accidents on the way. His sisters always doted on him though. Jayaraman had endeared himself to them too much for their fathers' priorities to matter. To his credit, he was an affectionate brother and respected the age gaps, always giving them an authority that they did not seek. Now with the age gap between them dwindling in a relative sense, he expected to be treated more like an equal.

Any hopes of being treated like an equal quickly disappeared when Jayaraman encountered his eldest brother-in-law, Shobha's husband Ashokan in the corridor outside his mother's room. Ashokan was pacing up and down the corridor in his vest and lungi, in the hope of stimulating his bowel movements. He was 16 years senior to Jayaraman and had the disposition of a school principal. During their numerous visits to each other's homes, Ashokan had always treated Jayaraman as a kid, forever deserving some form of advice. Today's advice was related to *Vaastu*. Ashokan looked seriously at Jayaraman and dispensing with small talk, quickly came to the point.

"You must demolish that toilet behind the dining room. Directionally that is a place for a temple," said Ashokan, his eyes looking piercingly at Jayaraman through the thick black-rimmed spectacles. Ashokan was the wealthiest of his sisters' husbands and the least friendly towards him. He rarely smiled and treated everyone and everything with skepticism. If he had not inherited his father's wealth and estate, thought Jayaraman, his poor social skills would have made it difficult to earn any livelihood other than as principal of a government school. He disliked the fact that Ashokan had to be respected because of his good financial standing in the community. Fortunately, thought Jayaraman, Ashokan was not great to look at and was fittingly suffering from chronic constipation. Nobody should be blessed with everything. Has Ashokan ever been

good-looking? On the day of his wedding with Shobha, almost everyone had whispered about how poorly matched the couple was. Shobha was easily the most beautiful girl in the community and everyone had expected that she would get married to a rich, fair and handsome man. Such was the contrast, that it was immediately obvious to anyone that Ashokan must be extremely wealthy to land such a beautiful wife.

“Yes, I know about that. But there are limitations,” replied Jayaraman as he juggled visions of toilets and temples in his mind.

“What limitations? You are an engineer. You should find a solution, not think of problems,” said Ashokan, his thick white moustache looking every bit as annoying as his disposition.

“Yes, I will look into it, *Anna*. I need to attend to something now,” replied Jayaraman as he chickened out of the discussion. With every passing year, it was easier to ignore Ashokan. Old people were likely used to being ignored, he told himself. As he walked downstairs to the living room he dialled Somashekhar’s number from his mobile phone. A thunderstorm had caused a giant tree to get uprooted, blocking the highway and causing a traffic pile-up. The lawyer was delayed and would reach their house only by lunchtime, if they were lucky. Jayaraman decided to visit the kitchen where the youngest of his elder sisters – Suhasini was preparing lunch with the help of the neighbour’s cook. The aroma of sambhar had filled the house and Jayaraman was already feeling hungry.

Suhasini was just a year older than Jayaraman, and she was the one he had spent most of his childhood with. After Suhasini failed to clear her Class 7 exams, they ended up

in the same class. This, however, was a double-edged sword.

Suhasini was a tough, outspoken girl and the class rowdies stayed away from her, and by association from him too. On the flip side, he could no longer cook up stories about what was happening in class. Specifically, it meant he could no longer return home late under the pretext of working on a school project. This 'project work' involved playing high-stakes cricket on the community ground. The losing team had to pay the winners Rs 100—and Jayaraman's team was consistently emptying their wallets. The boys from the far side of town were a more cohesive unit, more aggressive and wanted to win the 'prize', whereas Jayaraman and his friends played only for the thrill. Suhasini's lost year meant that cricket escapades had to be brought under control if not eliminated. In hindsight, it was all good, because their losing streak wasn't winning them any admirers among the schoolgirls, who had started picking their favourites from the rival camp.

"I think Somashekhar may join us for lunch. Make some extra."

"Don't worry, there's enough for a wedding party. We'll be eating this for two days," Suhasini replied, not looking up from the pumpkin she was dicing with an agricultural-looking but oddly effective knife. A large yam lay on the floor, waiting its turn. Jayaraman disliked yams. He thought they tasted like fish—even though he had no idea what fish tasted like. He was tempted to tell Suhasini to take it off the menu before he realised that it was probably there on the instruction of Ashokan. It was so uncanny, that foul-looking people liked foul-looking foods. Perhaps there was some truth in the saying 'You are what you eat.'

“Do you need any help?” enquired Jayaraman in the hope that he could park himself in the kitchen instead of bumping into another family member and indulging in small talk. “I have no space left for myself in the house. I am tired of walking from one corner to another.”

Suhasini took pity on him. “Dice that yam into cubes. It’s too hard for me. Not too small, not too big. This much—” she gestured with her thumb and forefinger. Jayaraman was not happy. Now he not only had to tolerate Ashokan’s favourite food on the table but also play a part in preparing it. He looked angrily at the yam and struck it hard with the biggest knife available in the kitchen. His scrawny arms were not good enough. It didn’t budge. The neighbour’s cook Narasimha took pity on him and cut the yam into 4 pieces. “There, it will be easier now,” said Narasimha with a kind face. Narasimha always had a kind demeanour about him. He was never agitated, despite the oppressive heat of the kitchen in which he spent most of his waking hours. “Food prepared with happiness brings happiness,” he had once said.

“But your employers don’t seem very happy, Narasimha,” Jayaraman had retorted.

“It’s not like that, Anna. They are a serious lot, that is all. But very kind-hearted,” Narasimha had protested. Jayaraman had continued to poke fun at his elderly neighbour, whose daughter he had once hoped to marry. Mr. Sundaraman should open a Museum of Unhappiness—he could hang all his photos there. *Even at his daughter’s wedding, he looked like he was at a funeral. No, on the contrary, I think he would be delighted to be at a funeral!”*

Hema Sundaraman was no Hema Malini, but to Jayaraman, she was good enough. She was an attractive, bold and assertive girl who had refused to take the mandatory classical music lessons and wanted to study filmmaking in Chennai with the flop actor turned hit

mentor Bala Kumaran. Her father, probably another yam lover, would have none of it. A boyish, good-looking classical music instructor was dangled as a carrot and Hema relented. Jayaraman was heartbroken. He was certain that Hema would run away with the music instructor at the first opportunity. However, his fears were unfounded. Hema's mother stood as a sentinel during the tutorials. She ensured minimal eye contact and strictly no note-passing, during or after class. After two weeks of fruitless 'twing' and 'twang' of the *veena*, the inevitable was accepted. The young master was paid a full month's salary as agreed. It was also the only time Sundaraman Senior had ever apologised to anyone.

"Hema madam does not visit very often, does she?" asked Jayaraman of Narasimha, in a tone feigning ignorance. He wasn't fooling anyone. His obsession with Hema was well known in the family and neighbourhood, even to the otherwise sage-like Narasimha. Suhasini glanced over her shoulder at Jayaraman, wondering when he would get over this one-way romance. She was friends with Hema and knew that she would never have courted a man like Jayaraman. She was too free-spirited, too ambitious, but most importantly she wanted to get out of this backwater town, whereas Jayaraman wanted to build an *ashram* in the same town and fill it up with city people.

Before Narasimha could answer, Suhasini snapped, "Her daughter is getting married. Didn't you receive the card?" Jayaraman nearly nicked himself with the knife. Suhasini had dealt a double insult. Not only had Hema married, but her daughter was old enough to get married too, whereas he had been clinging on to the past thinking of himself as some noble martyr to the cause of silent Romeos. Moreover, Jayaraman had not received an invitation, whereas *she* had. That meant Hema had decided to sever whatever little was left of their relationship, which at the

best of times could have been described as ‘cordial’. He wondered what could have been the last straw. He remembered responding with a heart-shaped emoji on her Facebook post about a year back. In hindsight, it did feel creepy. That must have been it. Jayaraman’s hatred for the yam grew with every passing second. He no longer wanted to be in the kitchen. He imagined Narasimha laughing at him and Suhasini suffering in embarrassment thinking that Narasimha was laughing. He quickly diced the yam into odd-sized pieces, washed his hands and hurriedly walked out of the kitchen. An irritated Suhasini shouted at the bolting Jayaraman as Narasimha looked on, confused, “Jaya, what is this? Those pieces are all different sizes. Finish them first. What an idiot!” By then Jayaraman had exited the main door, to buy a cigarette from the tiny shop across the street.

“What’s the problem if I buy it? I am sure everyone will be happy that I brought home some nice whiskey,” Ashokan was trying to convince Shobha that drinking the cheap Old Monk rum from Jayaraman’s inventory was not a good idea. “It is bad for the liver too,” he continued.

“All alcohol is bad for the liver. Why don’t you men remain sober? It’s just a matter of a few days.”

"Old Monk is for trade union thugs and washed-up uncles." I will not drink it. Let me go to the market and buy something nice. I am sure Krishnan and Raja will agree with me,” protested Ashokan, trying to find allies in the husbands of Aruna and Suhasini.

“You know Jaya is touchy about these things. He’ll think you’re being insensitive about his financial situation. Or worse, trying to rub it in.”

“What’s wrong with his finances? He’s opening an ashram, for god’s sake. He’s not who you think he is.”

“I know my brother. He’s just managing the project. The owner of Thanjavur Mills is the one funding it.”

“Your brother is going around saying he will be appointed Chief Spiritual Officer of the ashram. I never knew such a title even existed. “That’s why he’s grown a beard—trying to look like Rabindranath Tagore.”

“Ok, do what you want. If you are going to the market, take Krishnan and Raja along too. They must be getting bored.”

Relieved, Ashokan checked his wallet to see how much cash he had. Almost Rs 3,000 in cash. That was enough to buy a bottle of Red Label whiskey if not Black Label. In any case, all the Black Label in the market was counterfeit, according to him, so the cheaper option felt like a safer bet. He was looking forward to their drinking session in the evening. Devi’s house was located in a quiet neighbourhood overlooking a stream and some heritage mansions, and the terrace was a great place to sit and enjoy drinks along with Narasimha’s special fried chicken. Ashokan’s own house, built on a vast piece of land, had lost its panoramic views after a new highway was laid in front of it and attracted newer, taller buildings.

With newfound enthusiasm and the prospect of getting away from the overdose of reunion bonhomie, Ashokan exchanged his lungi for trousers and headed to Krishnan’s room adjacent to their own. The knock was answered by Raja, which disappointed Ashokan a little. “Krishnan and Raja must’ve been chatting without bothering to call me,” he thought. In Devi’s house, they were all in the same boat and were supposed to look out for each other. However, his disappointment was short-lived, as he learnt that Krishnan and Raja were sharing the room. Correct, he figured. There were only 4 bedrooms in the house.

Jayaraman slept in the small room on the lower floor, Aruna and Suhasini were lodged in Devi's room upstairs, and being the eldest son-in-law, he was given a separate room with Shobha. He discussed his intentions with the two men, and only Raja shared his enthusiasm. Krishnan preferred to rest, as he had arrived only this morning after an overnight train journey during which he hadn't slept even for a minute. Krishnan had a mortal fear of train derailments, especially when least expected—naturally, while sleeping. By staying awake and worrying, he felt he was somehow in control and could avoid a mishap.

Ashokan's school-principal-like demeanor was reserved solely for Jayaraman. With Krishnan and Raja, he was friendly, often unnecessarily so, especially when he sat in the saddle of elder son-in-law and tried to pass unsolicited advice on how family and business ought to be managed. Raja, the youngest, had little patience for his counsel, especially on business matters, despite being a man of numbers himself and running a successful Chartered Accountancy practice. He wanted to get away from it and secretly wished that Jayaraman would invite him to help run the *ashram*. During this visit, he planned to take up the matter with Jayaraman, something of which Suhasini hadn't the faintest idea. Today, he was even ready to seek Ashokan's advice—and was glad Krishnan had opted out of the market trip. With just the two of them, he could be more forthright about his intentions.

"Come on, I am all ready. Are we taking your car or mine?" he asked as he dangled the car keys in front of Ashokan.

"Let's take yours, but I will drive. I want to check out that little car of yours," he replied, referring to Raja's newly acquired Mini Cooper.

Across the street from the house, Jayaraman had lit a cigarette and was chatting with Senthil, the shop owner. The ever-curious Senthil had managed to summon some courage to ask him about the *ashram*. There were so many conflicting stories floating around in town, he didn't know what to make of them.

"Anna, how's the *ashram* project progressing? I heard that the boss of Thanjavur Mills has acquired a lot of land on University Road. Is it true?"

"What *ashram*? Who said anything about an *ashram*?" said Jayaram dismissively as if his tone could fend off further enquiry.

"Everyone knows about the ashram, Anna. But what they don't know is who will be heading it. I have never seen an ashram without a great *swami*."

"It is not that kind of ashram. It is more like a *Gurukul*. A place of learning where traditional wisdom will be combined with modern techniques to produce the best graduates in the world. The kind of men and women who will restore the former glory of India" replied Jayaraman with an air of superiority. Senthil pretended to be impressed.

"Very nice, Anna. Very nice. Can *anyone* study in the *ashram*?"

"Please stop calling it an *ashram*, Senthil. Until we figure out an appropriate term, let's call it *Gurukul*. And yes, anyone can study there. That's the whole point. It is very easy to take the cream of the crop and turn them into highly paid-professionals. That's what the IITs and IIMs do. But we will make extraordinary achievers out of ordinary people."

"Excellent, Anna. Excellent. My son is turning 18 this year. He is very ordinary. Can he also study there?"

“You are clueless, Senthil. But it’s not your fault. This is not a university. To study there you have to enrol your child when he is 9 or 10 years old. From thereafter we will take care of everything. Your son has already been moulded irreversibly by this flawed society.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Senthil.

“Besides, it will take at least 2 years to complete the construction of the *ashram*. It’s all going to be eco-friendly, sustainable stuff. Everything will be maintained by the students themselves. Hard work develops character,” said Jayaraman, acutely conscious of the lack of hard work in his own life.

“You’re a real visionary, Jaya *Anna*. Your father would’ve been proud.”

Jayaraman chose not to entertain Senthil’s praise. His father would have kicked him out of the house if he had attempted something like this in his younger years.

“*Anna*, if you don’t mind, what is your role in this noble undertaking?”

“I am the *Brahma* of this pioneering project. Everything – the curriculum, the campus design, and the selection process has been entrusted to me by Mr. Thyagarajan of Thanjavur Mills. What a remarkable man he is. He has full faith in me.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Senthil again.

“What sort of reaction is that, Senthil? Do you doubt my capabilities?”

“Absolutely not, *Anna*. Who is more capable than you in this town? You have been teaching college students for over two decades now. Who knows all this stuff better than you? Excellent. Excellent. Should I buy a small plot there to open a tea and cigarette shop?”

“There will be no cigarette or liquor shop anywhere in the vicinity of the gurukul. We will ensure that the municipal authority supports us in this.”

“But *Anna*, where will you smoke?”

Jayaraman was stumped. He had made up this restriction on the fly while talking to Senthil, just to create an aura of respectability about the whole thing. It was time to go, he thought, before he said anything more than he had a grip on.

“Give me a pack of 20. My sisters’ husbands are here for the weekend. We will be drinking in the evening.”

“Look, it seems they are going out somewhere,” said Senthil as he pointed towards a Mini Cooper heading out of the gate. Jayaraman was relieved that there would be some space in the house now. He was doubly pleased that it was Ashokan who was headed out. As he crossed the street, his phone rang. It was Somashekhar. Jayaraman had a feeling that the lawyer would not be able to make it. His guess was spot on. The traffic pile-up was worse than anticipated and Somashekhar had thought it best to turn back and make another attempt the following day. ‘*Why wasn’t there any rain in this blasted town*’, he thought. The mercury had crossed 38 and it felt like 48. He wouldn’t mind a few trees falling on Ashokan’s car.

“Ashokan *Anna*, I have been wanting to take your advice on something,” said Raja, sitting like a faithful dog next to the elder son-in-law as the latter drove the Mini Cooper with great concentration. Ashokan was paranoid about damaging someone else’s car, and his caution was uncharacteristic. In any other situation, he would have been thrilled at the prospect of offering advice, but presently he just wanted to get to the market without a scratch on the little car. Around him auto rickshaw drivers attacked from all directions, like locusts. A van driving in the wrong lane, flashing its lights, was hurtling towards

them unapologetically. He managed to avoid it only by going off the road. A tractor tailgating them stopped barely a hairbreadth away from Cooper's expensive posterior. That was it. His reflexes had been tested enough. He asked Raja to take the wheels.

"What advice do you seek?" he asked with a serious face, still smarting from the hurt to the ego as Raja drove confidently.

"Anna, I have been thinking of doing something different in life. Something more fulfilling. Like giving it back to society."

"Dismiss such thoughts. You have not taken anything from society. There is nothing to give back."

"You know what I mean. Money doesn't excite me anymore. There's got to be more to life than this."

"I think you need a break. Go on a long vacation. Spend some money. When you spend money, you have the urge to earn it back."

"I'll come straight to the point. You must be aware of Jaya's *ashram* project. I think I would like to be associated with that."

"An ashram run by a smoker and a drinker? What kind of people would go to a place like that?"

"Anna, those days are gone. People are more open-minded now — they can separate the message from the messenger."

"Do you think Jayaraman is some sort of messenger? He has no talents, no skills. He is just your average college professor and not a very bright one at that. His ex-students ridicule him in their gatherings."

"I think you are being harsh on him. He is not very academically inclined, but he makes some persuasive arguments about how society should be governed."

“Not academically inclined? For heaven’s sake Raja, he is a professor. If a professor is not academically inclined, we should be worried.”

“It’s okay, *Anna*. Most of the professors we had were mediocre too—but we turned out just fine.”. Most of my employees are also average performers.”

“Fine, what do you have in mind? You want to teach debit and credit to *Sanyasis*?”

“I’ve been thinking of helping raise funds for the ashram.”

“Didn’t you want to get away from this sort of thing?”

“I did. But this feels like a noble cause.”

“What’s noble about raising money for an ashram run by a smoker and drinker? One who leaves love emojis on photos of women old enough to be grandmothers?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your noble brother-in-law left a love emoji on Hema Sundaraman’s photo. “She’s old enough to be a grandmother.”

“Yeah, but not old enough to be Jayaraman’s grandmother.”

“So you’re defending this creepy old man's behaviour now?”

“It’s not my business. Besides, they are the same age! But how do *you* know about this?”

“Hema is on my friend list too.”

“How do *you* know her? I have never seen you two interacting. Besides, you rarely visit this town.”

“If my memory serves me right, she sent me a friend request. Anyway, let’s get back to your dilemma. I don’t think you will be doing anything radically different going by what you are suggesting. In any case, they already have a wealthy backer in the form of Thyagarajan of Thanjavur Mills.”

“They are just a front. It is someone else’s money. Thyagarajan has political connections in this area. That is all.”

“I see. But I would advise you to stay away from it. “Jaya’s an unstable character. He pretends to be a liberator, but deep down he’s a dictator. His revolution fantasy isn’t about justice—it’s about grabbing power.” He believes people are stupid and should not be allowed to vote.”

“Oh!”

“Yes. Did you see his bookshelf? Full of books on Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Stalin and Mao. But I am not worried because I know he is incapable of achieving anything.”

“Why is Thyagarajan backing such a person?”

“I am as clueless as you are.”

Raja’s exuberance turned into disappointment. For the rest of the journey, he drove silently. He was willing to give Jayaraman another chance, but it was best to wait till evening. A few drinks, and the truth would slip out—no speculation, just the horse’s mouth finally talking. Ashokan’s view could be coloured. As an estate owner, he hated communists from the bottom of his heart and even the slightest hint of the ideology in any person was enough to make his skin crawl. If Jayaraman had not been his brother-in-law, he would have probably shot him dead and left his corpse to be eaten by tigers in the forest bordering his estate.

When Jayaraman reached home, Devi and Shobha were talking animatedly in the living room, and upon seeing him enter they switched to whispers. This annoyed Jayaraman. He never said anything that he wouldn’t or couldn’t say loud and clear in front of everyone, so he

found this secretive attitude discriminatory. However, it was nothing that he wasn't used to and he ignored it.

"Somashekhar won't come today. He may come tomorrow. We can't be certain."

"Oh! What happened?" asked Devi.

"A tree fell on his head. I mean on the highway. Big traffic jam. He turned back."

"I hope he comes tomorrow. After a long time, everyone has gotten together."

"*Amma*, you should take it as an omen and drop the idea of reading your will. In any case, we know that *Appa* didn't leave behind any money. What is there to bequeath except this house and that small piece of land near the temple? You have already distributed all the jewellery among my sisters."

"That small piece of land is worth 90 lakh Rupees now. How can you treat it like something insignificant? Besides, there are certain things that you don't know about."

"I am sure Shobha knows about them. Why don't you tell me Shobha?" said Jayaraman in a mocking tone.

"What is wrong with you Jaya? Why have you become so bitter?" asked Shobha.

"Maybe that's what your whispering was about—'How to Keep Secrets from Jaya, Chapter 14.'"

Devi was taken aback by Jayaraman's belligerence. She had become accustomed to the growing bitterness but had expected some restraint on account of his sisters' husbands being present in the house. But it seemed like Jayaraman no longer wanted to mince words.

"What secrets have we kept from you?" Devi asked in a retaliatory tone.

"Every time I enter a room, everyone goes quiet. Every time you speak to *Akka* on the phone, you step out onto the balcony. What are these conversations that should not

fall on my ears? Have you ever seen me leave the room to talk to anyone?"

"Is that all? There are many things that women talk about, which they don't necessarily want to discuss in front of the men of the house," Shobha interrupted.

"It's not just about today and it's not as if you all are discussing menstrual problems all the time."

"Not every 'women talk' is related to menstrual problems. And it's not as if you men tell us what you discuss during your drinking sessions."

"You are welcome to join us. You are the ones who stay away. And in any case after a few drinks, everyone can hear what we are saying."

"Jaya, I can't believe we are having this conversation. Are you an adolescent kid?" Shobha had started to lose her cool.

"No, and I don't want to be treated like one."

"No one is treating you like one. You have been treated like a VIP since we came here. We have been serving you food, making coffee for you, talking to you nicely. Aruna even got up early today to make your favourite *payasam*. What have you done except throw your weight around?"

"I take care of *Amma* every single day. Are you grudging me a few days of comfort?"

"We take care of our in-laws too everyday. And our husbands. What do you expect us to do? Come here every day? Are you out of your mind? Taking care of *Amma* is your responsibility. You live in *her* house. You are certain to inherit it too. You are not doing anybody any favours!" Devi had enough of it and gestured that she wanted to go back upstairs.

"No *Amma*, sit here. Jaya needs to hear it as it is. He is so selfish that he never asked you to move to the bedroom downstairs, despite seeing you struggle to climb the stairs

every day. Just because he didn't want to use the shared bathrooms upstairs. He should be ashamed."

Jayaraman had made a mistake by pricking Shobha. She was not going to rest until she had delivered the knockout punch. She continued, "When the roof had collapsed, it was Ashokan who sent the money to repair it. Jaya did not offer to spend even a token amount. It's ok, he had just got his first job and no one expected him to contribute. When we had to erect the fencing on the temple land to keep out encroachers, it was again Ashokan and Krishnan who came forward to help. What has he ever done for this house? Changed light bulbs?"

Jayaraman was now turning pink. Too many allegations had gone unanswered. He had lost all his eloquence in the face of this unexpected onslaught. But Shobha was not done yet. "He dares to say that he takes care of you? What exactly does he do, *Amma*? The food is cooked by the maid. You take your medicines, which are home-delivered by the pharmacist. When you fall sick one of us immediately comes to attend to you. You walk up to your room without any help. What exactly does he do, I would like to know."

Devi tried to interrupt Shobha on behalf of Jayaraman – "Calm down Shobha, everything is not about doing. His presence in the house is a big source of comfort. You never know when there could be an emergency. He could have gone to live in the city like so many people do. But he didn't."

"If there is an emergency he wouldn't even know. Can he even hear you over the loud volume of his stupid TV? How many times does he go upstairs to check on you?" Shobha wanted to add that Jayaraman's not moving to the city had nothing to do with intent and everything to do with his lack of enterprise. But she thought that would be

too brutal, and Jayaraman had already started looking like a beaten horse.

The three of them sat in silence for some time, until it was broken by the sound of the Suhasini entering the room. Krishnan was peeping from the corridor upstairs. “What the hell is going on?” asked Suhasini. In the din of whistling pressure cookers and rattly exhaust fans, she had failed to hear anything except the last few sentences.

“Shobha was telling me how useless I am”, complained Jayaraman.

“You should tell her the full story,” replied Shobha.

“Let it be. Since Somashekhar is not coming, can we have an early lunch? I am very hungry.”