

# NEVER ENDING NIGHTMARES

By Pael Khugan

PAEL KHUGAN  
2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

**NEVER EVER ENDING NIGHTMARES**

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PAEL KHUGAN

## Author's note

Dear Readers,

I write this quick note to welcome you to the journey of chills and thrills that you are about to take. This being my first work of fiction, I wanted to share some of my thoughts and experiences that led me to write this book, with you, my dear readers.

From the time I was three years old and could put letters together to spell words, I have been an ardent reader of novels, poetry, everything actually, right up to the telephone directory when I didn't have anything else to read.

Although I enjoy reading as a whole, I have always noticed that I am always drawn to anything related to the paranormal. I do believe whether a person believes in ghosts or not, we all definitely love to hear a good ghost story or two just for that slight shiver that runs up the spine.

Thankfully my book is a work of fiction. In spite of that, during the months when I was working on it, I could feel a change in the atmosphere; slight chills and strange breeze around the place even when all the windows were closed. In fact it took me longer to write this book because after working on it for a few nights, I crept myself out. Trust me, it became quite scary to sit in front of the computer monitor and write about ghosts and spirits when the rest of the world was asleep. Numerous times I would fearfully look over my shoulders to be sure that there was nothing standing behind me.

I mentally admonished myself telling that after all I do not believe in ghosts. But, then I would hear a very small, reluctant voice in my head that said, 'You might not believe in ghosts, but the ghosts believe in you.'

Well, I truly hope that you would find this story entertaining and hope that I can count on your invaluable support for my future endeavors. I would love to get your feedback on the book; so do write a review on amazon once you've read the story.

As corny as it sounds, all I can say is, be prepared...to be scared.

Regards,

Pael Khugan.

NEVER ENDING NIGHTMARES

PAEL KHUGAN

*For my Family...as Always*

PAEL KHUGAN

## Prologue

*25<sup>th</sup> March 2006, the last day of a normal existence;* she thought. The series of events following that date could definitely not be called normal, in fact it fell way beyond the realms of usual and even reality perhaps. In a matter of few weeks, her beliefs, her convictions and even her sanity had become debatable. All at once she believed in nothing and she believed in everything.

The thin line between reality and fantasy had blurred such that logic and reality felt like hallucinations; while the world of supernatural took precedence, became tangible.

She decided to write down the chain of events as they happened, when they happened, in extreme and accurate details, with the hope that probably someone someday will read it and come forward with their own clash with the paranormal. So that she didn't have to feel this alone—didn't have to feel like the only person in the world to have gone through such bizarre and supernatural incidents.

She knew deep within her that till someone actually provided her with an explanation based on rationality and logic, never again would she be able to enter a dark room or take a walk alone in the woods without looking over her shoulders every now and then. She realized that the only way she would be able to revert back to a normal life once again would be on the one and only assurance that even paranormal activities and strange phenomena can have a perfectly lucid cause.

She closed her eyes and recalled the day when it had all started...

## Chapter 1

The aircraft had nothing in common with the numerous previous flying experiences she had had in all the standard commercial airlines. But then in its defense, the plane was not a Boeing or an Airbus. It was perhaps the oldest model of a Cessna that was ever allowed to still take off. Like a drunk bird it shook and vibrated and plunged its nose into all the air pockets on the way to the island. In fact, Ava was sure that it purposely found air pockets to run into.

Thankfully, she remembered Arul saying that they would reach the island within the hour. Bored of looking out of the window and not seeing anything apart from slate gray rain clouds and the occasional streak of lightening, Ava turned towards her co passenger and co life partner.

Of course she was not surprised to find him fast asleep through all the turmoil and the frequent air pockets—tiny, musical snores escaped from his slightly opened mouth. Ava knew Arul could sleep through the end of the world and wake up in a post-apocalyptic Earth.

Arul was casually dressed in khaki shorts that almost reached his knees and a white polo T-shirt. Gazing at his two day stubble, slightly longish jet black hair and a look of utter exhaustion on his face, Ava suddenly felt a surge of protective and tender love for her husband of five years. He had been working very hard to give her the time to finish her studies. She hoped that moving to this island will actually be a refreshing change for the both of them. That finally they will be able to spend some quality time with each other. She was really looking forward to a laid back island life, away from the ungodly hours that Arul's profession usually demanded.

She reached out to push aside a strand of hair that had fallen on his forehead when the plane bumped into yet another air pocket; this one was by far the worst. And she accidentally jabbed him right on his nose.

“Owww!” Arul woke up in pain rubbing his nose. He was still half asleep and didn't realize what exactly caused him the pain.

Ava grinned at him mischievously not letting him know that she was the one behind Arul's painful nose.

“Thank God you are awake. At least now you can move away safely when I throw up. It's the worst flight I have ever taken.” Ava grumbled playfully.

“What are you complaining about? I thought you always loved taking nice bumpy rides at the amusement parks.” Retorted Arul with mock indignation.

Ava glared at him while clutching on to the seat handles for her dear life. Trust Arul to always find something good in even the worst scenarios; while Ava was afraid of having her joints dislocated in the aircraft that felt more like a mixer machine in a construction site and less of a transport meant for flying.

She couldn't decide whether to love him for his sense of humor or kill him for not taking the ferry to the island and putting their life in jeopardy in such a pre-historic aircraft.

She started thinking of a suitable comeback remark, but before she could come up with a good one, the pilot announced that they were going to land soon. She looked at Arul, “Ok you got lucky this time mister. If we were in the flight for longer, I would have made you pay in many ways.” She whispered with a wicked grin.

Looking out of the window, Ava had the first glimpse of the scattering of islands—like the creator had casually thrown a fistful of emeralds on the ocean. She gasped involuntarily; experiencing the beauty of a rainforest for the first time. The sea was vibrant in different shades of blue, and aquamarine; while the jade green islands seemed to hide animals of a prehistoric era.

As the plane started to descend, the islands became more visibly distinct to Ava—almost beckoning her through the narrow windows of the plane. The trees, the silvery white sandy beaches, and the small fishing boats that were scattered around the coast. It was like another realm far away from the city of Mumbai that they had left behind.

The plane seemed to sigh with exhaustion as it clattered on the narrow runway which was just a strip of cleared land in the middle of a rainforest. A small wooden cottage-like structure comprised the airport. In spite of the micro-sized airport, Ava was surprised to see that there were actually over ten employees there on duty.

There were staffs at the mini check-in counters and the security were scanning baggage on the smallest baggage belt Ava had ever seen. The entire airport had a much laid back and relaxed air that felt very welcoming to the young couple.

“Wow! What an island.” exclaimed Ava happily hugging on to Arul’s left arm while he struggled with two bags on each hand. Arul was secretly relieved at Ava’s reaction, because he knew this move was something immensely drastic for the both of them.

After collecting their baggage they pushed their trolley through a narrow slope to the entrance of the airport. The entrance basically was a glorified term for a small clearing of about twenty feet of land which was fenced up with steel wire mesh in the middle of which stood huge Iron Gate.

The company driver was waiting for them outside the airport with a jeep that had definitely seen better days. He was a local fellow in his late thirties with a round, chubby face and a full smile that showed all his teeth. His twinkling eyes expressed his delight in seeing them—*as though we are long lost friends*, thought Ava amused.

“Welcome to the island of Ayu; or as we say in Malay, ‘*Selamat datang ke Pulau Ayu.*’ I am Faizal and I will be your driver cum guide for the next few months till you get to know the island better.”

“Nice to meet you Faizal. I am Arul and this is my wife Avanita; I hope you have not been waiting too long for us.” said Arul with a warm smile, extending his hand towards Faizal and shaking his in a firm handshake.

“Not at all sir. It gave me enough time to sit and enjoy a cup of *teh tarik*” he said pointing towards a small rundown tea stall beside the airport. “Please, please come this way.”

He opened the door of the jeep and after loading their luggage at the back of the vehicle, he helped Ava settle in the backseat while Arul sat in front next to Faizal. It was an open jeep. Ava wondered whether the term ‘convertible’ could be applied to four

wheel drives—her knowledge of cars was in fact pitiful. Whatever little she knew about cars was from Arul; whose two passions in life were cars and movies.

The jeep was a rusty, faded orange in color and had a huge roll bar between the seats and the baggage compartment.

*It almost looks like a shabbier version of those they used in Jurassic Park*, thought Ava. Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard Arul's voice.

"Faizal are we going to the bungalow or the site?"

, "We are going to the bungalow sir," replied Faizal. "I have been instructed to ask you and madam to relax today and tomorrow. If you want, I can take you around the island so that you get a feel of the place. Either way, since it's the weekend, there is not happening much at the site."

Faizal took them to the house that the company had provided for them. The drive to the house itself was exhilarating. The narrow winding roads curved through hills covered with dense forests. Teak, Cedar and Mahogany were some of the trees that Ava could recognize; the rest of them she did not know the names of. The tree trunks were covered in green creepers while the undergrowth was a motley of ferns.

From various bends on the road, the sea appeared and disappeared as though they were caught in a game of hide and seek. The air smelled so fresh and clean. A natural balance between the citrusy Jungle and the salty sea-weedy ocean.

Having spent her entire life in a crowded city Ava felt that she has ended up in some episode of Lost. She couldn't believe there were such naturally beautiful places in the world. It was truly magical and Ava could feel herself falling in love with the island.

"That is the jetty." said Faizal pointing to a wooden plank that had been extended into the water in a bay area. "If you like seafood, you should come here in the evenings around five or six; that is when the fishermen bring in their evening catch. It is quite charming to watch them even if you are not buying anything."

"Oh! We both love seafood." Exclaimed Arul. "Though we are not very good at cooking it." he said, giving Ava a teasing glance.

Ava made a face at him and turned towards Faizal. "Tell us a bit about the island Faizal. I don't see many people around."

"Yes, you are right, there aren't many people on the island." Agreed Faizal. "Actually, Ayu, that's this island, belongs to an archipelago on the eastern side of Malaysia. The sea you see here? It's the South China Sea. 'Ayu' in Malay means beautiful,"

Ava agreed readily saying that it was the most beautiful island she had ever been to.

"Thank you madam; coming from beautiful or 'ayu' people such as you and your husband it is a very big compliment indeed." laughed Faizal heartily.

"I too happen to feel the same way about the island. That's why I do not want to leave it and work in the mainland as many of my other family members and relatives have done. The entire island is around fifteen square kilometers," continued Faizal. "The population is less than four hundred. Mostly are fishermen, farmers, timber loggers and their families."

"What about tourists?" asked Arul? "Do you get many?"

"Not really. Ayu has not been developed by the government for tourism. The other islands around like Tioman and Redang are bigger and more tourist friendly." answered Faizal. "Here there is more timber logging activity. Also the coral reefs surrounding the island are sharp and dangerous for anybody who does not know the route through the

water. So it is not suitable for water sports, like jet skiing, island hopping or snorkeling. And tourists look forward to those things during vacations.”

“What about shops and markets? I hope we won’t have to keep going back to the mainland for everything.” Asked Ava. Suddenly realizing the logistics of living in a secluded, lonely island.

“Don’t worry ma’am,” assured Faizal. “There is a small market place in the middle of the town. There are shops selling groceries and other essential items. There are also some local restaurants and a clinic. Although in case of serious illness we still need to go to the mainland. Also there is a school for the local children, Every Wednesday evening there is a night market which we call ‘*Pasar malam*’ that sells everything from vegetables, to fast food to watches and clothes. It is something that we islanders look forward to all week.”

The island life sounded dreamy and laid back—felt like an alternate universe when Ava thought back to the busy rat race back in Mumbai.

She couldn’t wait to see the house that they were going to call their home for the project period. She knew that they may have to stay in the island for almost two years and was secretly praying that the house provided would be something she loved. She remembered Arul saying that the house they were being given was supposed to be spectacular.

As they got closer and closer to their new home, Ava’s heart started beating faster with the anticipation of a gorgeous mansion, though a small voice at the back of her mind started to whisper tiny bits of doubt; after all why on earth would there be any gorgeous mansion on a very functional, albeit beautiful island.

Then suddenly, when the jeep took the final curve, all her doubts vanished as Ava saw a glorious villa rising majestically with the hills behind it and the ocean in front of it. Red palm trees framed both sides of the driveway, while just beyond the driveway were scattered flower beds with a few fruit trees among them. The trees swayed in the breeze that came in from the open seas—*almost as if inviting her to her new home* thought Ava amusedly.

The entrance of the house overlooked a huge and well manicured lawn with thick turf grass and beautiful shrubs displaying an abundance of flowers in a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors. Ava noticed that the species of the plants on the island were very different from the ones she was more used to seeing. Everything ranging from the ferns to the giant trees at the periphery of the property looked like they were from the Jurassic era. For just a micro second, she could feel a tiny shiver as she realized that never before has she ever lived in a place this isolated, this secluded.

A gravel driveway led to the front steps of the house. Rose beds lined up both sides of the driveway to make a bright and colorful path into the house. The driveway was U-shaped. A flight of broad steps led up to the house. On each side of the broad stairs, there was a fountain that ran down through the entire length of the stairs—the water flowing from one oval marble basin to another.

At the top of each fountain, stood a marble statue of a woman, carved exquisitely to such minute details that it looked almost real. The water flowed from jugs held by the statues that later ran down the lower layers like a river flowing through a series of rapids.

From the car porch the stairs led up to an old fashioned wrap around verandah that surrounded three parts of the house. Throughout the edge of the verandah at regular intervals, were carved wooden pillars. The carvings on the pillars were so intricate and fine that to observe each pillar would take the better part of an hour.

The entire verandah had beautifully varnished teak flooring that gleamed in the morning sunlight. Exquisite antique teak furniture fitted with plushy and bright cushions with a coffee table right in center made up a small nook ideal for breakfast or tea time, or even a place to lay back and enjoy a book. The view from there into the sparkling blue sea was breathtaking. It was evident that no expense had been spared in creating a mansion with the best of things that money could buy. Ava forgot her prior reservations and immersed herself into the fairytale luxury that surrounded her.

On the opposite side of the verandah was an enormous wooden daybed crafted in a Balinese design. It was almost as big as a queen sized bed framed by four carved pillars from which draped a delicate lace canopy creating a dreamy and extremely inviting corner.

*Here is where I am going to write my thesis*, resolved Ava; but before she could say that out aloud she saw Arul winking at her suggestively with a mischievous smile as though he had something completely different in mind.

The house was a tastefully constructed two storey structure also done up following the Balinese architecture. Faizal opened the door and asked them to go ahead and have a look while he took care of the luggage.

The main entrance led through a foyer into a grand living area. A glass wall on one side of the living area looked out to the vast blue of the sparkling sea. At that side there didn't seem a point of difference, where ended the house and began the sea. *Almost as if I am on the deck of a large ship*. Thought Ava.

The furniture was an eclectic mix of rosewood and rattan. Flawless carvings, scattered with modern paintings that splashed curious mix of colors adorned the otherwise white walls. Even the trinkets that were placed on the many tables and shelves around the halls looked like something straight from an exclusive art gallery. Ava felt like she had walked into a page of the Architectural Digest.

Leading through a corridor off the hall was a dining area that ended into the kitchen. Ava wandered into the kitchen and pleasantly surprised to it well equipped with all modern amenities inclusive of a microwave and a conventional oven. Beautiful copper bottomed utensils hung overhead a kitchen island. She was sure, that she wouldn't ever be needing that much equipment—cooking skills were below basic.

Behind the kitchen was a small laundry room fitted with two heavy duty washing machines. Even the laundry room was well stocked with shelves stacked with detergents, bleaches, softeners and anything else that might be required for laundry.

From the laundry room, a door lead outside to the backyard and beyond the backyard were hills covered with a pine forest.

She returned to the kitchen, curious and perhaps a little greedy to discover whether the kitchen was also stocked up like the laundry room. She poked around the cabinets finding them filled with dinner sets of fine bone china and the drawers filled with cutleries and crockery such that she never had before, in her own house.

In fact, Ava realized, that the kitchen was equipped enough to cook a gourmet meal for probably a party of fifty. Ava felt slightly uneasy with the perfection that the house provided. *Almost as if like a Venus flytrap it wanted lure them in and mesmerize them into its invisible webs*. The thought made Ava jump out of her skin. *What made me make that comparison?* She wondered anxiously. Before she could analyze her thoughts

further, Arul walked in with eyes shining and pulled her by her hand to show her the rest of the house.

They discovered a small suite complete with a tiny patio, a small sitting area and an attached bath. The bed was freshly made with a floral patterned bedspread matching the curtains and the upholstery of the sitting area.

Upstairs there were four bedrooms each done up perfectly like that of a model house. The master bedroom was created in a harmonious blend of antique teak and rose wood furniture. A giant four poster bed in the middle asserted the fact that it was the master bedroom. The whole room had a touch of the yester years—as if once you are in there, you forget which era you belonged to.

Even in here, one wall was completely made of glass and overlooked the distant blue horizon of the ocean.

On the other side of the bedroom was a walk-in closet that led to the master bathroom. The bathroom was very modern, in contrast to the bedroom. Complete with an enormous sunken bath that came with inbuilt Jacuzzi functions; and a separate shower area. Two huge His-and Her sinks with a giant rectangular mirror dominated one wall. While, following the style of the rest of the house, one wall was done up with glass panels that gave an unobstructed view of the sea similar to the bedroom windows.

Ava heaved a sigh of bliss thinking of the beautiful view that she would be able to enjoy while relaxing in the tub. At a distance she could see the fishermen coming back with the day's catch.

Everything was perfect, to the extent of fresh linen folded neatly in the linen cupboard. In fact, thought Ava, it was overwhelmingly so. It was like a dream.....only when has a dream been this perfect? Suddenly she heard Arul's voice.

"AVA! Come quick you've got to see this." yelled Arul.

Ava rushed out of the bathroom to the bedroom expecting something terrible that Arul had found to prove to her that everything was not that perfect after all. She found Arul stretched out, with his hands behind his head relaxing on the four poster bed staring at the cabinet.

"What happened? Why did you scream so loud?" asked Ava confusedly.

Smiling excitedly, Arul beckoned Ava towards him, patting the space beside him asking her to sit down. Ava sat on it half curious, half annoyed—her heart still beating fast from the suddenness Arul's yell.

"Tada!!!" exclaimed Arul beaming joyfully showing her his latest discovery. The TV cabinet through the help of a remote could actually be rotated to face the bed in case they wanted to see television in bed.

*MEN.* Thought Ava indulgently, *they are definitely not difficult to impress. Of all the wonders and beauty of this magnificent house, all he is impressed about is the TV and its cabinet.*

"Idiot!" exclaimed Ava with a smile, rolling her eyes.

The grandeur of the house was too overwhelming. It sometimes did not make sense as to why such a palatial structure with so many modern amenities came to exist on such a small and isolated island.

There were so many unanswered questions. *Who had actually taken the pains to make a company house this perfect?* Thought Ava. *Was there a caretaker?* She didn't think so.

It didn't have the impersonal feel of a hotel or a guesthouse or even a company house. It didn't have the cold, synthetic functional feeling of a place that was created with the employees or even management of a timber company, in mind.

The house felt more like someone had built it with the intention of living there and every little thoughtful facility that Ava discovered in its nooks and crannies spoke volumes supporting her theory.

As Ava browsed through those mystifying thoughts in her mind, she heard a knock on the open bedroom door.

"Come in" hollered both Ava and Arul together—scrambling out of the bed where they were both sitting down.

In walked Faizal carrying a few of their bags. The cheeky grin on his face deciphering their hurried descend from the bed as something else.

Ava blushed furiously, understanding how it must have looked to Faizal. Being a very private person, she was always uncomfortable with public displays and emotion. And in this case, they were not even up to anything.

Of course Arul being always in sync with his wife's thoughts and to make the atmosphere casual once again spoke.

"This is an amazing space Faizal. We never in our wildest dreams expected a company house to be this beautiful. Or this well stocked. I am going to love working for these guys man." Added Arul with a happy grin.

"Actually," Faizal said, clearing his throat, "the story behind it is not a very happy one." Ava and Arul both looked at him questioningly as he gave them a brief history about the house.

According to Faizal, the house was built by a very affluent industrialist who wanted a beach house in the island, where he could spend time with his family. It was built on a land area of twenty two thousand square feet. The owner made sure that it had every facility that he and his family were used to in the mainland. Every month he came down to check on the progress of the construction. When finally the house was completed, they furnished it with the most luxurious furniture and modern appliances.

"I remember it well," continued Faizal. "It was like a '*pesta*' (festival) here. Most of the islanders lead a simple life and had never seen a big TV or microwave ovens before that."

They learnt that the family moved in only for a few short months. After those few months, one day the owner's wife had a fatal accident. In fact she died on the way to the hospital in the mainland. At that time there were no medical doctors on the island; the islanders believed more in faith healers and medicine men. Following that incident, the owner didn't want to keep the house saying it had too many memories of his wife and sold it over to the company that had employed Arul.

The man had been so devastated to learn about the absence of medical doctors on the island that he personally financed a clinic in the island to ensure that nobody else would be unfortunate enough to share his fate.

"In fact" emphasized Faizal, "you are the first people to be staying in the house after the owner left the island. There was a watchman and his wife looking after this house all

this while. But, three nights ago they left suddenly without a word. Must be that they got a better job at one of the resorts in a nearby island.” he added knowingly.

Hearing the distressing story of the house, Ava had felt a wave of despondency wash over her—taking away along with it the previous excitement of living in such a beautiful bungalow. She felt very sorry for the lady of the house; she thought back to the kitchen, done up impeccably. The beautifully decorated Verandah—all designed for a life of happiness and contentment. Perhaps every piece of furniture, every painting, every wall color was handpicked by the ex-owner’s wife.

Ava looked around the place with a new set of eyes, trying to, *wanting to*, understand the late, unknown woman a little more—perhaps as an ode to her, so that she is never forgotten.

To break the somber effect that it had on all the three of them, she decided to go to the kitchen and make all of them a cup of tea.

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 2

By that evening, most of their things had been unpacked. Tired, Arul went up to take a nap, but Ava was too overwrought to sleep. She ventured out to the vast verandah. Lying back on the Balinese settee she gazed out to the sea, taking in the beauty of the blue infinity. The sky was pencil grey with the monsoon clouds darkening it long before the actual sunset. The cool salty breeze from the ocean was as soothing to her aching body, as a warm bath. Ava closed her eyes thinking back thinking back to the events that led them to this beautiful place with a strange history.

It was one evening in late January, Ava remembered, when Arul for the first time suggested about the opportunity of moving to Malaysia. Arul, at that time was attached to a private hospital in Mumbai. Ava had just finished her MSc. in microbiology and was in a dilemmatic state of whether she wanted to pursue further for a doctorate or get into a job.

Arul was one of the most promising and bright surgeons in the city. Having achieved such an important position at the very young age of thirty five, he had to constantly prove himself and his capabilities to his lesser deserving colleagues. A lot of them being older than him and having been practicing in the medical field longer, were not too happy when the chief of surgery always made it a point to choose him for challenging surgeries over looking the others. Jealousy simmered dangerously under the façade of polite professional courtesy among his colleagues, even though it should not be; especially in the noble profession that encompassed saving human lives.

A doctor's profession in its normal course itself demands more time than any other profession—sickness being rude enough not to be bound by the regular working hours. And Arul having bigger shoes to fill, almost had to be living in the hospital. Sometimes Ava hardly saw him twice or thrice a week. The rest of the week Arul would mostly be caught between surgeries, duties in the emergency rooms, training up the interns and filling up paperwork. For Arul working straight for thirty six to forty eight hours had become the norm rather than an exception.

Whenever he was home from the hospital during the week, there were no conversations between him and Ava. He would be too exhausted to even share a sit-down meal with her and would go off to sleep—sometimes for twelve-thirteen hours. Most of the time he would wake up from those slumber at the insistent beeping from his pager proclaiming an emergency, and thus would have to head back to the hospital.

Their marital life was taking a backseat and often their conversations metamorphosed into arguments. Both could see the other person's point of view, but then there was nothing that could be done at that time. Life was just too demanding for a coffee break.

But it had not always been like that. In fact, all their friends used to tease them saying that looking at both of them together was like a seeing a live performance of Raj and Simran from a popular romantic comedy in Bollywood.

Ava and Arul had first met in the emergency room. She had taken her friend, who had hurt her ankle while climbing down a flight of stairs in a shopping mall. She remembered Sulekha her friend, had absolutely no tolerance for pain and was howling away as if her bones had all shattered in the process.

Ava, just to humor her, and stop people from staring at them had rushed her to the emergency room of the nearest hospital. But on reaching there, Ava had been further embarrassed. The place was filled with patients who genuinely needed emergency care. A place filled with bleeding accident victims, and people who have perhaps just survived heart attacks.

Sulekha was acting very childishly and demanding too much of attention from everyone around her. She was totally oblivious to the genuine emergencies around her. Ava wished she was anywhere else but there—being a part of the spectacle that Sulekha was causing. She did try to hush her really loud friend. But she was no match for Sulekha's boisterous nature. The more pain she felt, the ruder she became which caused much annoyance among all the nurses and the other medical staff in the emergency room.

Arul was the doctor on call in the emergency room that night. He arrived at Sulekha's cubicle looking beat. At first none of the girls noticed him. Then it was Sulekha who first saw Arul. That was followed by a dead silence—as though she had run out of words, or oxygen, or maybe both.

After all, which warm blooded female could resist the sight of the well toned muscular young doctor around six feet something in height looking as delectable as a young Robert Redford with jet black hair and broad shoulders.

*Wow! Thought Sulekha. Today is my lucky day.*

Ava looked up, surprised at the sudden silence where her friend seemed to have suddenly turned mute and noticed the young doctor standing towards the foot of the emergency room bed.

There was something about Arul that attracted her to him instantly. It wasn't just his ridiculous good looks. It was more of the way he held himself, and the utter exhaustion in his eyes. Suddenly even though it wasn't her fault, Ava felt extremely guilty for troubling this young doctor and wished she could do something to make it better.

"Hi. I am Dr. Arul" he introduced himself while glancing briefly at the clipboard in his hand. "What happened here?"

"Nothing." Replied Sulekha.

Arul raised his head from the clipboard and looked at Sulekha.

"Nothing?" He asked sardonically. "And yet you are here in the emergency room. What exactly are you here for?"

Sulekha still in a state of shock at probably meeting the guy of her fantasies could not utter a single legible word. The best that she could manage was "I ssslip fffaall down. Hehheeee,...." ending in a nervous giggle.

"Excuse me?" asked Arul impatiently. He was aware of the effect of his above average looks—he was used to being complimented about his way above average looks from nurses and patients alike. However, that particular day had been exhausting. And he was not in the frame of mind to entertain infatuated ladies.

Not wanting to make a further fool of herself, Sulekha leaned towards Ava and whispered urgently.

“Say something yaar! Don’t make him think that I am such a big idiot.”

“She slipped and fell down a flight of stairs in the shopping mall,” explained Ava speaking softly.

Arul raised his head, and for the first time noticed the young woman standing beside Sulekha. It was as if someone had punched his stomach and took away all his oxygen. He was looking at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her dark chocolate eyes held him hypnotized and he couldn’t look away from them.

For a moment he forgot where he was—such was her attraction. Then realizing the extreme unprofessional manner with which he was behaving, he chided himself mentally.

“I see. Well it’s not too bad. It’s just a sprain and there are no signs of any hairline fracture,” said Arul in his most professional voice, while checking Sulekha’s ankle.

He rubbed some ointment to the ankle and tied it with a crepe bandage, following which he prescribed her some painkillers and told her she will be fine in a few days. Sulekha was not too happy that her twisted ankle was not treated with more respect--especially since she was lucky enough to get one of the handsomest doctors to treat her.

She insisted that he give her his mobile number so that in case of an emergency she can call him. Arul very patiently tried to make her understand that there can be no emergency in the case of a twisted ankle.

Ava was standing beside her friend, all the while feeling mortified by the way Sulekha was behaving. It was so evident that Sulekha was just trying her luck to get a date with the handsome doctor and was not really worried about her twisted ankle.

Ava’s face turned red with embarrassment. She promised herself that never again would she go out with Sulekha in public and get herself knotted up into such situations. She didn’t know what to say or how to react at her friend’s such unacceptable behavior. Arul on the other hand found Ava’s discomfort and her shy nature extremely endearing. He found her smile and her shyness around him very endearing. He liked the way her thick straight hair kept falling over her beautiful hazel eyes and he wished he could get to know her better, without actually getting Sulekha involved in the process.

Strong, pushy, demanding girls like Sulekha were definitely not his type. He finally came up with a plan.

“All right,” he told Sulekha coming up with a brilliant plan at that moment.

“I am going to give my number to your friend here. If *she* feels it’s an emergency then *she* can call me and I will see what has to be done next. She seems cool headed enough to know when to call.” added Arul smiling towards Ava hoping that she got the message.

Ava could feel her heart doing a butterfly dance. After exchanging the phone numbers, (yes, Arul took Ava’s number down as well), ‘in case of emergency’ as he had put it at that time.

On their way back home, Sulekha tried her hardest to get the number out of Ava. But Ava was adamant saying that she was not going to break someone’s trust. Even if it was someone she hardly knew. Secretly she hoped that he would call.... After all what was the necessity for him to take her number if he didn’t want to call her?

The next one week was the most frustrating time for Ava, as she anticipated his call every time her phone rang. But it was never him. After a week when she had just given up thinking about receiving a call from Arul, she suddenly got a call from an unknown number while she was rushing out of the house for an appointment that she was already late for.

“Hello,” said Ava briskly cursing whoever the caller was; for making her delay her appointment further.

“Hi. Is this Avanita?” asked a hesitant male voice on the other end.

“Yes?” asked Ava still impatient to end the call as soon as possible and go for her appointment.

“Sorry, have I called at a bad time? It’s me Dr. Arul Mathur...err... we met last week when you brought your ankle over your injured friend,” said Arul nervously.

“Sorry, friend with an injured ankle,” Arul chuckled mentally kicking himself for sounding so nervous.

Ava burst out laughing, at Arul’s mix up of words. It was an uncontrollable laughter interspersed with one or two snorts as well. That was what always happened when Ava found something genuinely funny.

She understood that he was as nervous around her, as she was around him. Arul started laughing as well, and the ice was broken.

“You have a beautiful laugh” said Arul, “though I am not sure I have ever heard a human snort like that,” he added.

“Well for your information *doctor!* A lot of guys find that very sexy,” she replied playfully.

“Now I know why so many young men are coming to the emergency room with hearing problems” came back Arul. But before she could reply, he quickly interjected. “However if you let me buy you dinner say tomorrow night, I too would say that snorting is soooooo sexy.”

Ava wanted to say no, wanted to show that she cannot be available at such a short notice. But the words didn’t come out how she planned. Instead she heard herself saying “Of course. I would love to go to dinner with you.”

“Great! Shall I pick you up at say 7.30 tomorrow evening?” asked Arul—his happiness palpable even through his voice.

Their first date went spectacularly. Arul took her to a very tasteful Italian restaurant that had a huge garden laid out with candlelit tables. The trees were done up with fairy lights. The whole place seemed to be magical. Ava was amazed that such a place existed in her own city and she wasn’t aware of it.

Ava was surprised to realize how comfortable she felt in Arul’s company. Between them there was a natural flow of conversation, a relaxed vibe that takes years to culminate and yet happens only to very close friends. Arul seemed genuinely interested in all she had to say and didn’t for a moment take his eyes off her. Never before had Ava felt this precious, this special.

She couldn’t help but notice that quite a few women glanced towards Arul with a look that was more than the common curiosity although Arul seemed to be completely unaware of the ripples he was causing.

Ava was wearing a sheer chiffon smoky white *salwar kameez*. She had brushed her straight shoulder length hair till it gleamed in the soft light of the restaurant. She had applied minimal make up, and her face shone with a healthy glow. She was aware of the appreciative glances that Arul gave her now and then when he thought she wasn't looking. Their tastes in most topics were similar to the extent of being almost unnatural. Never before had Ava met anybody who could make her laugh so much. She was really sad when the date ended and Arul left her on the doorstep of her house where she lived with her parents with nothing but a slight peck on her cheek. She knew that she was falling in love with the handsome doctor even before she reached her room.

After the first date, any free time either of them got was spent in each other's company. At that time Ava was doing her Masters. After six months of courtship, it was only natural to get married. Their married life in the beginning was filled with laughter and togetherness that is only found in a relationship based on the kind, love songs are written about.

Gradually though, his work got too demanding and there was never a time for them to plan anything together. Both of them loved kids and wanted their own someday. But even that thought was left behind because there just didn't seem to be enough time in Arul's life to be a husband or a father.

It was during that time when one night Arul came back after thirty six straight hours of emergency room duty. He came home quietly. He tiptoed inside the bedroom, and hugged and kissed a sleeping Ava till she woke up disheveled.

"I really missed you," said Arul kissing a half asleep Ava passionately on her lips.

Ava still groggy from her sleep was bewildered. She glanced at the digital clock on the bedside cabinet in between the kisses and saw that it was 3.47am.

"Honey, what's going on?" asked Ava, puzzled.

Arul was generally too tired to for any kind of comforting or sex when he came back home after long duration of ER duties.

Holding Ava's face between his hands, Arul planted another long kiss on her forehead, and then sat up. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts before he spoke again.

"What if we just left everything behind for a few years and renew our love, you know going back to how we used to be without these grueling hours at the hospital."

Ava too sat up slowly on the bed. She realized that this wasn't just Arul procrastinating. He genuinely wanted a change.

"How do you mean?" asked Ava. Confused. At the same time trying to be encouraging because being away from it all—being able to spend enough time with Arul has been all she has been wanting for the last few months.

Arul said that he realized that his job was actually taking him away too much from her and he wanted a change. He had, a few months back applied for a job in Malaysia. It was on a contract basis and nothing too demanding. In fact most of the time, he would probably just be on standby.

"I cannot understand," asked Ava, puzzled. "I mean you are a doctor. What possible job will have you on a stand by?"

“I am being hired by a Malaysian timber company” said Arul with a slightly amused smile. Seeing he had confused Ava further, he pulled Ava close to himself, held her in his arms and explained.

“It is a Malaysian timber company,” he said. “They have been awarded a timber concession in one of the islands off the coast of Malaysia. They had been looking around for a doctor who is capable of handling emergencies with the most basic of all equipments, willing to stay there for a period of two years and is independent enough to do all this by himself. I had seen the advertisement in the paper a few months ago and had applied for the post just for the heck of it. And I got an answer today. The company’s human resource director met up with me for lunch today and I was approved on the spot.”

He looked at Ava, searching her face for the approval, the answer that he was seeking. But it was too much for Ava’s groggy brain to process at that time of the night.

“Imagine Ava,” Arul continued like a salesman, selling a dream. Two whole years on a tropical island with everything provided and I work one third the number of hours I put in here. The pay is good too since I will be paid in US dollars now, it is going to be a lot more than my current salary. What’s more,” he added, “we will be given a company bungalow, car, driver, and anything else we may require for a comfortable life in the island.”

Ava took a deep breath trying to register what Arul was offering. It truly felt like her prayers were being answered. But before she started reveling, she needed to understand the authenticity of this dream-like proposal. After all, she was still half asleep and everything was happening too fast. “But... you have worked so hard to reach where you are now. Will you just let it go? Give it up just like that?” She asked doubtfully.

Arul tightened his arms around her and kissed the soft spot behind her ears.

“Darling,” he said, “nothing is more important to me than us. We have been drifting away from each other over the last few months. I know that it is mostly because of my work schedule. I have thought over it for quite sometime. We need a break from all this; a break from this ‘rat race.’ ”

“I didn’t want to tell you about this opportunity before because I didn’t want to raise your hopes before I got a concrete offer,” continued Arul. “But now that it is here, I want to take it. Even I feel burnt out and tired all the time. It would be good to get away from all this for a couple of years.”

Arul was so convincing, so persuasive that Ava had no argument against it. She had wanted this life, craved for it for too long. A life where they will finally be more of an actual couple and less of two married individuals. She also realized that in such a case, she can follow her dreams of writing her thesis for a doctorate. In fact she had already selected the topic. She wanted to do her thesis on the effects of pollution on mutation of pathogens.

She looked up at Arul and answered his question with a kiss. Arul’s entire body seemed to relax under that kiss. He himself didn’t realize how tensed, how anxious he had been till Ava had agreed to his plan. He had desperately needed acquiesce from Ava. It was a relief. He just hoped that Ava would never come to know the real reason for him to leave his position at the hospital.

## Chapter 3

The first two weeks on the island was almost like a second honeymoon for Ava. The weather was the bright and breezy—exactly like the kind promoted on all the travel sites that invite the people of the tundra climate to spend their vacations in the tropical islands. The mornings were cool giving in to hot afternoons which in turn changed into breezy, balmy evenings or heavy rain on some days when the heat became unbearable. It was almost as if nature found a way to balance itself out in the island.

Their days were as fun-filled and carefree as when they first got married. Ava realized that the thing she missed the most during those hectic months, was Arul's smile.

In the last six months his schedule had become so tight that he wore an almost permanent frown. It felt like ages since she saw the loving, the teasing, and the mischievous side of Arul. She thanked God in a silent prayer for once again bringing back laughter into their lives.

Getting adjusted to the island life, Ava discovered to her dismay looking after a mansion by herself was not a simple task. This was the first time she had to do everything by herself without any hired help. Back in India housemaids were so common that she didn't realize how dependent she had become on the maids to do the housework. Moreover she always had her mother or mother-in-law hovering around her on top of the maids, always fussing and taking charge and hardly letting her do any housework.

*It had to be my bad luck that the caretakers had to run away just before we came,* she thought annoyed at those unknown faces. She found it very difficult to take care of such a big house, laundry and every other domestic labor that was necessary in order to maintain a proper household.

Faizal was given the very important mission of finding a maid for Ava; but in the meantime, Ava much to her annoyance was bogged down with housework for the first time in her life. Thankfully she could fumble through and produce a decent meal; but was hopeless in the department of cleaning or the laundry.

It was perhaps the second week after they had moved into the house when Ava first noticed the series of weird things that started happening.

On that Wednesday both of them had gone to the '*pasar malam*' (night market), to buy their weekly supplies. Arul was supposed to meet up with some of his other colleagues who had come from the mainland for a drink. Ava was also invited but she declined because the day had been too tiring for her. She had spent the whole day cleaning the house, doing the laundry, as well as researching for her thesis.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” asked Arul on the way back from the market. “I mean you have been cooped up in the house so long. I am sure going out for an evening and meeting new friends will be good for you.”

“I wish honey.” sighed Ava exhaustedly. “I would love to go out and meet your colleagues someday. But today I am simply too tired to socialize.” Ava hoped that Arul would realize that her sigh was a call for help in the domestic department, but sadly her much dramatized sigh went unnoticed.

“It also looks like its going to rain,” said Ava, leaning out from the jeep window to look at the darkening sky. “I have to take in the laundry from drying before it starts to rain.”

“Fine then,” said Arul a bit disappointed that she wouldn’t accompany him. “I will not be very late. But don’t wait up for me and you can always call me on my mobile in case you need anything.”

By then they had reached the entrance to house. Ava gave Arul a hurried kiss on the cheek, grabbed her bags of groceries and got out of the jeep. After asking her half heartedly whether she was going to be absolutely all right by herself, Arul turned the jeep around and drove off. He did feel bad that he didn’t help her with the groceries, but he was getting late. His colleagues would already be waiting for him.

It was almost eight in the evening and once the jeep’s headlight was not shining on the house, Ava was alarmed to see the whole place was absolutely dark. She could just barely make out the steps leading to the house. She realized that when they had left for the market since it was still bright outside, she had forgotten to switch on the lights around the house.

The house and the trees surrounding it, were like giant monsters standing still; waiting for her to come closer—waiting to snap their jaws around her.

*What made me think such a nasty thought?* Wondered Ava, shuddering involuntarily as her body responded to the unnamed fear that encompassed her suddenly. Out of nowhere, an unknown unease settled around her. She felt invisible eyes watching her, sniggering malevolently at her from the shadowy corners and the foliage of the enormous trees.

Ava was very surprised at the intensity of her fear; she had always been the brave one among her friends and family and had never let her imagination run wild like this before. She smiled wryly and decided that there it was the darkness, the strange place as well as her utter exhaustion that was creating the background to such a horror story. The sooner she gets into the house, the faster she can switch on the lights and then all these silly ideas would evaporate immediately.

She quickly climbed the flight of steps leading up to the entrance and tried to open the front door. In the dark, she found it very difficult to find the keyhole to put the key in. The hostile darkness felt like a breathing and pulsating living thing that was slowly creeping up from behind her trying to engulf her into oblivion.

Ava could feel her hands shaking, her palms sweaty. She realized that she was breathing hard—her heart beating at an unnatural speed. Her head throbbed painfully as if she was hit by a sudden migraine. She could feel her stomach churn with nausea. She wanted to take out her cell phone and switch on the flashlight. However, some unknown instinct refused to let her waste even a couple of moments to search for her phone inside her bag.

She was suddenly overcome by an extraordinary conviction that there was someone waiting for her behind the locked door. And that once she opens it, she will come face to face with the subject of her fear. The visions that her mind had been conjuring up all of a sudden felt very real. It was as if she could almost put a face and a shape to the source of her fear. At that moment, probably the slightest sound would have made her just drop the keys and run away from there forever, without looking back.

Never before had Ava felt such a heart stopping irrational fear. The key absolutely refused to enter the keyhole even when she found it. She was so nervous that she dropped the key a few times and every time she bent down to look for the key, she could feel unseen eyes boring down her back making the skin at her nape tingle with dread.

*Do not look back. Don't look back.* Like a mantra Ava chanted in her mind, not questioning herself even for once, why she was forbidding herself from looking back. Thankfully at that moment the key clicked and the door swung open.

It was dark inside; she could barely make out the outlines of the furniture in the hall. The smell that hit her the moment she opened the door made her heart race with fear. It was a very familiar medicinal smell intermingled with the smell of strong disinfectants and an underlying smell of disease and decay.

A perfect way to describe it would be the way all hospitals smell. She stood rooted to the same spot with fear, trying to find a reason behind the pungent smell which was making her nausea worse. She felt dizzy and the room seemed to go out of focus; she could swear that whatever little she could make out of the marble statues in the living room, they seemed to observe her with very menacing, very life-like smiles.

Ava felt her fear growing. She was sure that she was going to get an anxiety and realized that if she didn't switch on the lights immediately, she was going to faint with fear. She started groping the walls for the light switches.

In her state of panic she knocked something off from the foyer cabinet. As the thing crashed down on the floor making a loud clanging sound, she could swear that she heard a cackle of laughter disguised within the noise of the object falling.

Together, both the sound of the falling object, and the eerie laughter reverberated throughout the house from room to room. Ava screamed and at the same moment luckily found the light switch.

Once all the lights in the hall were switched on, she rushed to the guest bathroom and started throwing up uncontrollably; retching till her stomach muscles cramped, till her throat felt like it was on fire—till she felt her intestines would come out of her mouth. After several minutes, shaking with nerves, Ava stopped retching. She splashed water on herself, and very weakly, supporting herself with the surrounding walls, she stood up. Her head was pounding so badly that her eyes felt like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

Even after rinsing her mouth and gargling with mouthwash several times, she was unable to get rid of the foul taste in her mouth. *It feels like I have inhaled the fumes of nascent formalin.* Thought Ava; shocked looking at her reflection on the mirror over the sink.

She took a deep breath trying to relax and then walked back to the hall. Everything was in its place exactly the way she had left it. Her books were on the coffee table and her laptop was on the sofa. Even the heavy intoxicating smell seemed to have vanished,

though she could feel traces of it in her mouth. She looked down to see what she had dropped in the dark and found the brass lamp that was placed on the foyer cabinet had fallen and all its oil was spilt over the marble floor.

Ava quickly cleared up the mess before the oil could flow farther. Then she went around switching on all the lights in the house; from the patio to the backyard; all the places were flooded with lights. The lights brightened the place enough to give any passerby a false impression of a full fledged party going on at the house.

Feeling a lot better and she just sat down on the floor of the hall trying to catch her breath. She couldn't make out what exactly had happened to her a while back. With all the lights of the house switched on, slowly she started feeling a bit silly. She probably had overreacted as this was the first time she was ever alone in the evening. Besides, it was also the first time that she saw the house so dark. Moreover, being all alone did not help one bit.

She reasoned that since there was no neighboring houses or streetlights to shed some sort of light on the house, in the darkness her 'city girl' imagination had run wild and all the rest was just the various figments of that imagination. She felt certain that when the brass lamp fell on the marble floor, the noise it made sounded like laughter. She smiled remembering how loud it had sounded in the dark.

Once the practical part of her brain finally took over, she realized that with that kind of a deafening sound in the foreground, it was impossible to hear any kind of laughter in the background whether it existed or not.

Ava was convinced that even the smell was a figment of her imagination. If not, then how could a stench that strong disappear in a single moment without leaving behind a residual smell? It was just not possible. However, the lingering aftertaste in her mouth still left room for argument in her head although she pushed that terrible thought to a deep corner of her mind, trying to forget all about it.

Feeling much better after coming up with all the explanations and theories, she decided to go and make herself a cup of coffee and then take in the laundry from the back. She had forgotten all about it, though that was the main reason why she came home instead of joining Arul. At that time she wished ruefully that she had done so. As if on cue, she could hear the rumble of thunder somewhere close; she rushed to the kitchen and opened the back door through the laundry room.

Big, heavy drops of rain started to fall as she hurried around picking up the laundry from the clothesline. Behind her the broad leaves of neighboring trees rustled and swayed wildly in the wind. Almost as if they were whispering among themselves about secrets that Ava was not aware of. That initial feeling of fear and unease seemed to creep closer to her once again. Ava quickly picked up everything, strode inside and slammed the door behind her. The wind by then was quite strong and she almost had to use all her strength to close the door. It was as if something riding on the wind wanted to follow her into the house.

Once she was inside the laundry room, a sudden bout of dizziness overtook her and in a moment, she found her limbs not responding to the commands of her brain. A terrible sense of exhaustion overwhelmed her; she could hardly move a muscle.

Her head started throbbing again and she started to feel the faint taste of bile rising up her throat to her mouth. She realized that the smell of chloroform and formalin was very strong in the laundry room. Ava started shivering uncontrollably; she tried to convince

herself that the shivers were because she was partially drenched from the rain, and the cold wind blowing in from the space under the door was making her feel chilly.

But neither could she explain her headache, nor the numbness of her limbs or even the smell. Ava felt the cold fingers of pure and unadulterated fear crawling up her spine. She knew that she was going to choke on the smell and faint there if she didn't leave the room instantly. She almost ran out of there locking the door between the kitchen and the laundry room on her way out.

She grabbed a towel from the bathroom and hurried to the hall. There she switched on the television and turned the volume up really loud so that it would block her thoughts of terror and help her regain control over her mind. It's fine. It's just my imagination; thought Ava trying to convince herself while she dried her hair. She forced her mind to concentrate on the action movie they were showing on TV that night.

The rain didn't last for long, it died down within an hour. Ava spent that hour on the sofa in the hall trying to watch the mindless action movie. However, she couldn't concentrate on what was going on in the story. Her mind struggled to make sense of the feeling of unease that she had all of a sudden developed in the house. She didn't know when she fell asleep and only woke up hearing Arul's voice.

"Honey, why are you sleeping here? Don't tell me that the bed's too big for you without me." teased Arul.

Ava could judge from his suggestive winks and the silly grin that Arul who was not much of a drinker must have had a couple more than what he usually had.

She was so glad to see him back that she didn't even bother to protest on his comments or his consumption. She just gave him a tight hug, said that she was very sleepy and then followed him upstairs, changed into her cotton nightdress and got into bed. She hugged Arul throughout the night, although sleep was quite disturbed, interspersed with dreams that she couldn't remember.

The next morning the sun was high up in the sky by the time Ava woke up. She could hear Arul humming downstairs among the clatter of pots and pans and realized that he was probably making breakfast. She glanced at the bedside clock and realized it was 8.45am, which for Ava was quite late. After all, every morning she went for a jog before breakfast. She almost jumped out of bed and rushed downstairs. Arul had made pancakes for breakfast and a pot of freshly brewed coffee stood on the kitchen counter. Their aromas made Ava's stomach rumble.

"Hey Gorgeous," he said giving her a peck on the cheek. "You were sleeping so peacefully that I did not want to wake you."

"So sorry love, I completely knocked off," said Ava apologetically. Before anymore conversation could take place they heard Faizal honking in the driveway waiting to take Arul to the clinic.

"It's okay! Have a great day. I'll try to sneak back for lunch," said Arul kissing her on her forehead before rushing out of the door.

In the brightness of the day, enjoying her morning coffee, Ava shrugged off the experiences of the previous night as the work of an overactive imagination. She was

convinced that her mind had been playing tricks on her—being in a new place, in a new country and a new way of life.

She decided not to tell Arul anything about her fear the night before. Both she and Arul were extremely rational. Ava was sure that if Arul had even a hint of how scared she was the night before just because of a series of unfortunate events, he would be teasing her till the last day of her life.

Smiling and shaking her head at the thought of Arul's gentle teasing, she started spreading butter and maple syrup on the batch of pancakes that Arul had left on her plate.

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 4

Thankfully, the next two weeks were incident less. They had settled down comfortably, enjoying the languorous routine of island life. Arul would go to the logging site every morning around nine and come back home for lunch, spending an hour with Ava and would return to the site for a couple of hours more. Once the loggers stopped working for the day, he would come back home for the day.

Since logging didn't happen once the sun set, the moment it became dusk, work would stop for the day. That way Arul was back home every day by six, six-thirty in the evening—a routine that was unheard of when he was working in Mumbai.

Ava enjoyed spending these long hours with Arul. He was always in a good mood, pulling a lot of pranks around her—reminding her, taking her back to their courting days. Their shared laughter and uninhibited joy like a balm slowly started to heal the tensions they had with each other during the days of Arul's long hours in the hospital.

Luckily there were no major accidents in the logging site and Arul had only to treat minor cuts and scrapes that the loggers could not avoid during their labor. To use his free time for the good of the locals, he had started practicing from home in the evenings. Nothing like the hours that he kept earlier, just a couple of hours, doing his part for the community.

News spread around that the new doctor was '*bagus*' (good), and people from around the island and sometimes even from the surrounding islands came to consult him on their various sicknesses. Arul refused to accept any money since his job was paying him well; although sometimes due to his patients' insistence, he would just charge them for the medicines that he dispensed.

Arul came up with visiting hours to help organize a routine for himself, as well as the patients and their families who came to see him. That way, people wouldn't come to see him at odd hours, because as a doctor, he couldn't send away a sick person.

Every weekday from seven to nine he would see patients in the house. He started using the patio and the sitting area in the guest suite for this purpose. The patients used to wait for him on the patio in front of the guest suite. Ava had put out a few chairs there so that the patients and their families could sit there while waiting for the doctor.

Ava was proud of her husband as his reputation grew throughout the island. In fact, he had become somewhat of a mini-celebrity. And because of his celebrity status, there was never a shortage of food as most of his patients paid Arul's kindness with everything from fish, chicken, vegetables to wood carvings and varieties of '*keropoks*' that were the local version of fried chips.

Arul too for the first time was truly satisfied with his life. The joy he felt curing the straightforward, friendly villagers of their minor illnesses were ten times more than the most successful surgeries he had performed back in Mumbai. There the patients had just been bed numbers and he could hardly remember any of their names without actually

referring to the charts. However in Ayu, he knew everybody's names, their families and about their children. It was such a feeling of personal contentment that Arul marveled at how the island had changed him.

Ava felt better knowing that there were more people in and around the house and she had to spend less time by herself. Although, by then the incident of that night was becoming less and less threatening, she was still glad that she didn't have to be alone in the house much.

One morning Faizal came to the house with a lady from the nearby village. He introduced her to Ava as Noraini; she was the domestic helper that Ava had desperately been looking for. Ava was ecstatic that she finally had someone to help her with the house work. Faizal explained that she could only work on a part-time basis as she had three school going kids to take care of. She would come to the house every morning and go back in evening after completing all the chores. He also requested Ava to allow her to take Sundays off.

Ava kept glancing towards Noraini curiously, since as Faizal spoke, she just stared at the floor and refused to lift her head up. When there was a slight break in the conversation, Noraini raised her head and gave Ava a shy smile. Ava smiled back instantly liking this slim petite lady who should be in her early forties. Noraini had a very trustable and responsible look. She was wearing a light blue '*baju kurung*,--the traditional Malay costume that constituted of a long sleeved blouse that came down almost to the knees and a skirt that reached down to the ankles. Her head was covered in a dark blue '*tudung*'--a long scarf that traditional Malay ladies use to tie around their head.

Her slightly slanted eyes in her oval face gave her a very exotic look. However, looking at the puffy bags under her eyes and the worried faraway look, it was evident that she was going through a stressful time. Even though she was trying hard to conceal her personal worries. In spite of all that, she probably had the most beautiful skin that Ava had ever seen. It was not just her fair and creamy complexion; there was a glow that seemed to be emanating from within her. *How did the Malays have such beautiful skin?* Wondered Ava admiring the soft glow of Noraini's smooth and milky skin.

Turning towards Faizal, Ava then voiced her main concern. "But how am I going to communicate with her?" She asked in an uncertain tone. "I mean I just know a few words of Malay. I do have a book that says '*Learn Malay in a Month*' but it has not been a month and I am not sure whether I will truly learn the language in that time. Half the time I can't make out the difference between '*ini*' (this) and '*sini*' (here)."

Before Faizal could answer, Noraini interrupted. "Ma'am please don't worry," she said smiling hesitantly. "Before this I work in hotel in Tioman. I speak English little little."

Hearing Noraini speak English, Ava sighed with relief. She was sure that between her broken Malay and Noraini's broken English, they would be able to communicate pretty well with each other.

After settling on a monthly salary and explaining the various things that Noraini needed to do around the house, Ava asked her to join from the next day itself. She thanked Faizal immensely for doing her such a big favor. As usual he was full of smiles and told her not to worry about it.

Noraini was very happy to finally get a job that met her financial obligations. She had been looking around for a job like this for the last two months. Things had not been easy at home after her husband died. Finances were very low since then. When he was alive she used to be working as part of the housekeeping staff in a resort in a neighboring island. The pay was quite good.

However when he passed away at only forty eight just two months back due to a boating accident, Noraini had to leave her job to come back and look after her three school-going kids. At forty two she found herself all alone trying to raise her kids, which itself was no easy task for a single parent. She tried to get a similar kind of job on the island, but it was not easy to get a job as a house keeper on an island where most of the inhabitants were fishermen and farmers and nobody was in a position to pay the wages she required to run a household.

The last two months had been a real struggle for her. She had to juggle between taking care of her kids and trying to earn some money by selling food like '*Nasi Lemak*' and curry puffs at a road side stall; still it was not enough to feed a family of four. Being a mother she had sleepless nights wondering how she was going to resolve the situation.

Now, she was glad that she was going to work for the doctor and the wife; they looked like very nice people. She knew how important this job was for her and promised herself that she would not give her bosses any reasons to complain.

She came to the house early next morning. Arriving at the door at 7.00 am sharp, she rang the doorbell, looking forward to her day's chores.

"Good morning! You must be Noraini," said Arul smiling at her after opening the door.

"Yes '*tuan*' (sir)," replied Noraini shyly.

"Please, please come in," said Arul while extending his left hand towards the foyer.

Noraini immediately liked the doctor that she had heard the whole village talk about. He had a very kind face she thought, and his smile reached his eyes. Ava walked up behind Arul and welcomed her too. "Hi! Noraini! Would you like some coffee?" she asked with a smile.

"No thank you ma'am! I '*mula*' (start) with my work first," said Noraini startled, since in her twenty two years of working as a housekeeper no employer had been so friendly or offered to make her coffee. She was touched by this gesture and started on her chores— anxious to please Ava with her work.

Before Ava even had a chance to tell her anything, she cleaned the place thoroughly, dusting and vacuuming, changing bed sheets and tidying up everything, as though she had been working there for years and knew her routine. Ava was really impressed with her work and told her so.

"This is nothing madam, when I work in hotel, I clean twenty rooms a day' said Noraini smiling at Ava.

After Arul left for work, Ava took Noraini to the kitchen to teach her the way she and Arul liked their food prepared. She showed Noraini what to prepare for lunch and left her alone to go into the hall and work on her thesis.

Noraini put the rice and the ingredients for chicken curry on the hob. While waiting for the food to be cooked, she decided to do the laundry. There was a lot of laundry waiting to be done that day, seeing how she had changed the linens in all the rooms. She pushed open the door into the laundry room. Even with the bright morning sun outside, the room was quite dark and felt very chilly. She felt a shiver run up her spine. The small eight—

by-four room felt as cold as a refrigerator. She had a sudden feeling that there was someone watching her from the dark corners of the room, although she knew that there was only Ava and herself in the house. She quickly reached for the light switch feeling her heart beating unusually fast.

The light brightened the dark corners of the room and Noraini sighed with relief. However she noticed that even with the light on, the gloomy brooding atmosphere in the room did not change. Instead of the light washing off the darkness, it felt as though the darkness was swallowing up the light into a shadowy void. It was as if there was an actual fight going on at that moment between light and darkness and she could feel her subconscious mind responding to the strange atmosphere by making her heart beat at an erratic pace.

Being no stranger to the local supernatural myths and beliefs, Noraini understood that something was not right there in that room. She could feel a malicious presence of something inhuman. The air was so thick with a negative energy that it felt like a physical force was trying to knock her out. Though she could not see anything she knew something was there, but just what was that 'something,' she was not sure.

Her mother was known for her powers over the supernatural and unborn spirits. She had been the local witch doctor; a '*Bomoh*' as they are called in Malay for as long as she was alive. She had actually helped a lot of the village folks to get rid of incurable diseases or spirit possessions. In fact that was another reason why Noraini had left to work on another island as the villagers assumed that she had her mother's powers and that she would be able to perform the same miracles and services.

Noraini had the same powers as her mother did, though it was not as strong, since she didn't practice the way her mother had. She knew the dangers involved in challenging the beings of the other world---in fact her mother's death had taught her a lesson. She had died under unexplainable circumstances; her head had been turned at a one eighty degree angle, and she was literally facing her back when her body had been discovered. Everyone knew, but no one spoke about the fact that nothing human could have done that. The only consolation that Noraini had was that the police report said that her mother had died instantly and not suffered longer than a few seconds.

Being around her mother and aiding her from time to time, Noraini had also learnt to feel the presence of spirits around her. She could distinguish between a good spirit and a malevolent one.

Her mother used to tell her that the mortal world and the spirit world had lived side by side for thousands of years, sharing the same natural habitat. Most of the time, the spirits kept away from the humans as any interaction between both these worlds would interrupt the delicate balance that existed on the earth. That was why there were those like her who were bestowed with the powers to always guard that delicate balance.

However, if there was one found in a human habitat, it was most likely there because of some unfinished business that was left incomplete at the time of their death. Unfortunately, such spirits could be dangerous as they wouldn't hesitate to harm a human if it fell on its path of unfinished business. The other thing that made these spirits a terrible threat was their abilities to manifest themselves and even possess a human body if they wanted to, or if the person in question was weak willed.

Not sure how to address the problem, Noraini decided to carry on as usual and not alert the spirit of her own feelings. Suddenly though, she felt extremely giddy and almost lost her balance. It was almost as if she fell from a great height. She could feel the butterflies in her stomach.

She knew that feeling—it mostly happened at night when a body is at rest. During deep slumber the soul leaves the person and moves around. But if it is somehow disturbed or scared by the presence of a spirit, the soul rushes back into the body causing that feeling of falling. However, very very rarely does that same feeling occur when one is awake, and the soul is very much present within the body. Only in the presence of a very vengeful spirit can a soul feel this disturbed.

Noraini knew that it was a warning from the presence in the room. She knew that the presence wanted her out of the room. She knew that she had to tread very carefully around whatever it was that was haunting the room. And being a believer herself, she didn't want to take any steps that would invoke the anger of the presence.

Remembering her mother's words, she recalled that spirits could understand a person's fear based on their body language—whether their presence could be felt by someone or not. Knowing that, she put on a casual face and started bundling up the linens and shoving them into the washing machine. All at once a very strong and sweet smell started to waft through the room. It was a kind of smell that was common only in hospitals and not usually anywhere else. The overpowering smell made Noraini nauseous and she could feel bile come up to her mouth.

She knew that a spirit strong enough to manifest a smell in broad daylight must be a very strong one. She was almost certain that someone was standing behind her. She could feel short chilling breaths, as cold as icicles on her nape. She knew that if she did turn around, she would definitely come face to face with the entity. She closed her eyes and started to hum a tune, as though she was not aware of anything amiss.

She was not prepared to face it just yet; she knew she had no protection against it at the moment and any mistake she made may be her last. She was also worried that it could unleash something onto her bosses as well. Noraini felt tiny beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Trying to put up a brave front she bent down pressing the correct buttons on the washing machine while trying very hard to stop shivering against the chill.

She finished loading the washing machines as fast as was possible without letting the entity be aware that she was frightened, or even aware of its presence. The smell was getting stronger, as though the entity was challenging her, calling her bluff in a game of poker. She knew she had to hold her breath till she got out or she may not be able to remain unresponsive to the feeling of nausea that seemed to have overtaken her completely. She knew if she gagged or threw up or reacted in any way that indicated that the stench was unbearable, the spirit would be conscious of its effect on Noraini and that would certainly seal her doom.

Only after she got out and closed the laundry room door behind her, did Noraini let out her breath. Her heart was beating hard against her ribs and felt as if it wanted to be released from her body.

She was used to seeing her mother exorcise people; she was used to feeling the presence of spirits. But never before had she ever been as frightened as she was in that room in broad daylight. She knew whatever it was in there was a lot stronger and implacable than anything she had ever experienced before.

Noraini was in a dilemma. She didn't know what to do with her newly found knowledge. *Should she let her bosses know?* She wondered. But she was not so sure that they would believe in what she had to say; *after all they were city people, and one was a doctor.* She thought.

Noraini knew from experience that city folks were not the type of people to heed her warning to be careful of unknown and unseen forces. Rather, if she did tell them, she may lose the job which at that point of time was the only thing that was between her family and starvation. She realized she didn't have any choice but to keep quiet and not let them know. Perhaps over time they themselves will feel something, seeing how the entity wanted acknowledgment of its presence. However the one thing she was sure about was that she was not getting into that room again without some kind of protection. She decided to make one for herself once she went back home.

Her heartbeat resumed back to the normal rhythm shortly, after she had got back into the kitchen area, and she couldn't feel any presence of malevolent spirits. This convinced Noraini that whatever was there in the laundry room was confined there—at least for the time being.

As she went about putting lunch on the dining table, the sky became considerably darker. Thunderclouds were rolling in from the sea. The air started getting significantly chillier. The sky looked like some one had covered it with a dark grey blanket. Monsoon was over in February; still sometimes the unannounced electric storms in the islands could be very fierce and such storms are quite frequent in a tropical climate.

Noraini hoped that Ava will let her go back home before evening, she really didn't want to be in the house during the storm. She was not sure whether the spirit that was confined to only the laundry room for now may at the time of the storm, roam around the house freely.

After all, during storms vengeful spirits became more powerful and they could use the forces of nature to cause harm to people. She never understood how that happened, although she herself had witnessed something like that fifteen years ago, when her mother had performed an exorcism that brought thundering storms to the island. The storm had continued for five whole days—till the spirit had successfully left the body of a young preadolescent girl.

Noraini was worried for her bosses. She didn't want the spirit to be able to come out of the laundry room and cause any harm to them. Looking around the kitchen, her eyes fell on a crystal salt and pepper shaker set that was kept on the kitchen counter. She knew that spirits couldn't cross the boundary of salt. She smiled as she thought of a brilliant idea.

She quickly took the shaker and started spilling the salt in a line in front of the laundry room door. Her hand started to shake apprehensively and she tried to complete the line hastily, before the spirit could cross it. Suddenly she could hear the sound of someone breathing angrily on the other side of the door. Something inside that room growled softly, and could only be heard by someone who was listening intently as Noraini was.

Right then Noraini realized the huge mistake she had made. The salt shaker fell out of her hand and hit the floor with a crash, breaking into tiny pieces. Noraini knew she was in big trouble. Her not-so-brilliant idea had let the spirit know that she was aware of its presence.

She sat down on the floor with a bump, her mind completely blank. She didn't know what to do next. "How could I have been so stupid?" she kept murmuring to herself. She started sweating profusely even though it was quite chilly. And to seal her fate, she could hear a soft eerie laughter coming from behind the closed door.

Ava was on the phone with Arul when she could suddenly hear something crackling in the line. It sounded like a static noise that was quite common during heavy rains.

"What was that?" asked Arul. "I can hardly hear you properly. The line here is really bad."

"Yes I know. I think it's because of the approaching storm that the network coverage is affected," explained Ava talking louder so that Arul can hear her.

"Anyway, I will be home soon and will not have to come back after lunch to the site. They are stopping work for today. Everyone is talking about the storm; seems like it is going to be quite a serious one. According to the islanders they have not seen one this bad for almost fifteen years now," said Arul sounding both in awe and worried about the approaching storm.

Before Ava could answer she could hear a third voice in the phone.

It was more of a hoarse whisper of someone calling out her name her name.

"Avanitaaa.... Avanitaaa..."

"Arul did you hear that?" Ava shouted on the phone her voice on the verge of panic.

"Arul! Arul? Hello? Can you hear me?"

There was no answer from the other side; in fact there was no more noise in her mobile phone. Ava realized the connection had got severed. *But when? Did he actually hear the whispers as well?* She wondered worriedly. She tried to call him back, but the line did not go through.

Ava was extremely shaken up by this; the fear of the other night came rushing back. She was almost sure that she had heard the whisper. It sounded like a female voice, so in no way could it have been Arul playing a prank on her. *But then, how could she hear a whisper so clearly when the connection was not good enough to hear Arul properly?* She asked herself.

In the middle of puzzling out what she had experienced, Ava suddenly heard a crash in the kitchen. She hurried towards the kitchen, fearing Noraini had hurt herself.

In the kitchen Ava found Noraini sitting near the door to the laundry room. There was salt spilt all around her, the salt shaker had fallen down and being a crystal one it had broken into a hundred pieces.

Noraini looked scared. Her face was so pale that it was almost white.

Ava instantly read into the situation. Noraini must have accidentally dropped the crystal salt shaker and broken it. Ava was a very kind hearted person. She knew that being the first day on her job, Noraini must be feeling very scared of being scolded for being so careless; Ava decided not to prolong Noraini's fear.

"Its okay," said Ava. "I can see the salt shaker must have fallen from your hand accidentally. You don't have to be so scared of me being upset over it. Just be a bit more careful from now on."

Noraini was really surprised. She didn't expect Ava to react in that calm manner. She thought that Ava would realize that she was actually making a boundary of salt in front of the door and ask her questions about it. Noraini was relieved that she didn't have to answer that awkward question.

"Anyway" continued Ava. "I just heard that the storm is going to be bad. I think its enough for today. Why don't you go home today? I will handle everything. Tuan would also be back soon" she added.

"But Ma'am, I have not cooked dinner, and there is still '*banyak*' (a lot) to do in the house. I just put laundry in. It has to be dried after it's '*cuci*' (washed)," said Noraini.

"*Tengok* (look) at the sky Noraini." smiled Ava pointing towards the window. "It doesn't look like we can dry anything today anyway. Why don't you come back tomorrow and do everything? Just sweep up the salt and the broken glass and then u can go back," said Ava and left the kitchen.

Noraini didn't argue further. She knew that this is what she had been wishing for a while back. She didn't want to stay in the house during the storm—not especially after making the spirit angrier than it was before. She quickly swept away the salt and the glass pieces being careful not to even glance towards the door that hid a storm bigger than the one that was approaching from the sea.

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 5

Noraini left after cleaning the kitchen and promised to return the next morning.

Without the sound of Noraini bustling around, the house suddenly felt very quiet. With the table already set by Noraini, Ava didn't have much to do, except to wait for Arul. She decided to wait for him in the verandah while getting some research done for her thesis.

She loved the view of the ocean from there; it calmed her down. It felt like looking at a priceless painting. Although she knew, no man-made painting could capture the exact beauty. The ocean cascading to the beach, the different shades of blue and green intermingled so harmoniously in the water, or the way the sunrays danced on the waves. Perhaps it was only meant to be on Mother Nature's canvas. From the rushing sound of waves running up on the silvery sand to the fragrant rose beds of the garden Ava was lulled into a state calm that was in contrast to the agitation and the fear of the last few weeks.

*The gardener really has green fingers.* Thought Ava to herself seeing the newly bloomed roses in front of the driveway. They were lucky to find an adept gardener from the village who used to come once a week and take care of the garden. Hassan was a quiet middle-aged man who hardly spoke unless it was absolutely necessary. He too was recommended by Faizal. *I don't know what we would have done without Faizal.* Wondered Ava sending a silent thank you heavenwards.

Making herself comfortable on the enormous teak settee with her lap top in front of her, she turned her attention to the report she was reading on the avian flu virus. She needed to include certain parts of it in her thesis.

However as much as she tried to concentrate on the report, she found her mind wandering off. She kept on thinking about the whisper she heard over the phone. Although she was mostly convinced that what she had heard was just a crackle in the line, a noise in the phone due to a bad service zone; a noise that just sounded like someone whispering her name due to a freak coincidence.

But a tiny voice at the back of her mind was filled with an unknown apprehension. It was as if there was something happening around her; something out of the ordinary, something she was not aware of. She gave up the futile attempt of trying to read the report after ten minutes when she noticed that she was still on the first paragraph and her mind had not registered a word of it.

Frustrated with her wandering mind, she closed the laptop with a slam. Looking up towards the sky she noticed that within those last ten minutes the sky had grown awfully dark—furious burnt grey clouds had spread around the sky for as far as the eye could see. The wind had also picked up speed and was provoking the sea to lash angrily at the shore. The vibrant blues and greens of the ocean had disappeared as if by the spell of an angry sorcerer.

The sea heaved and roared like a monster waiting to escape and massacre the surroundings; the previously docile looking rocks stood in the midst of the furious waves like the fins of killer sharks waiting for the unsuspecting prey. As the waves crashed on the white sandy beach with a vengeance, she noticed that the tide was coming in at a very fast pace, and the sea was coming closer and closer with every thrashing wave.

The angry sea and the sky was enough to motivate Ava to get inside the house. She wished Arul would hurry back home. She didn't want him to drive back in the rain in an island that was still more of a stranger than an acquaintance in their life.

Once inside, she closed the glass doors to the patio. Immediately the sound and the breeze inside the hall died down. The interior of the house was almost dark. It looked more like seven in the evening rather than two in the afternoon. Ava switched on the lights around the hall and decided to go around and check all the windows to see whether they were locked properly.

As she started securing all the windows in the guest sitting area, she realized that the house had been getting bitterly cold over the past few minutes. The wind outside sounded like the painful howls of people being tortured mercilessly. The moaning sounds of the wind was deafening. She could see the sharp bright steel lightening tearing the skies around her while the thunder was loud enough to shake the very foundation of the house. The storm seemed to be like a manifestation of nature's wrath on the island.

And then came the rain. It poured hard and in gallons obliterating the view of the ocean and the garden completely. It was all so loud; the howling of the wind, the crashing of the waves against the rocks, the low growls of the thunder and the 'kra-aak' sound with which an odd branch from a tree would break and fall to the ground. Ava had never experienced a storm this close to the ocean. But as much shaken as she was, she was more worried for Arul and Faizal. Although she tried calling his cell phone a few times more, it was completely useless; the line did not get through at all. She hoped they had the sense to stop somewhere and not drive the rain.

She walked around checking the hall windows, then the guest room windows. Thankfully all were already closed. Ava smiled, appreciating Noraini's foresight.

In the guest bedroom, the chill was very unnatural. The floor felt frozen under Ava's barefoot. As if she had walked into a meat freezer thought Ava. She refused to let the tiny fleck of fear in her mind grow farther and left the room after turning on all the lights there.

Realizing that there was a possibility that some of the upstairs windows were open, Ava hurried towards the staircase. In spite of the brightly lit surroundings, every time the lightening slashed through the skies, and the thunder rumbled, Ava's heart thundered along with it.

As she climbed the stairs two steps at a time which had always been her habit, she felt, rather than heard, a soft thudding sound behind her on the wooden steps. It sounded like someone else was climbing the stairs behind her, but was taking one step at a time. She paused, trying to assess how real the sound was; but it seemed to vanish the moment she paused. She turned around trying to pinpoint a source that could have made the noise, but everything looked just the way it was.

Ava turned around and started climbing up the stairs again, slowly this time, taking one step at a time while keeping a sharp ear out for any further noise. Thankfully she couldn't

hear the thudding noise anymore. Relieved, Ava told herself that she must have imagined the noise or it was a sound caused probably due to some echoes created due to the rain.

Right before she entered the bedroom on the right hand corner of the corridor off the family hall upstairs, Ava suddenly felt someone rush past her through the door as she tried to get inside the room. She could feel a cold rush of wind that chilled her to the bones and she couldn't stop herself from shivering. She stole a glance over her shoulders looking nervously towards the hall dreading to see the unimaginable. But once again there was nothing there. She started to feel extremely jumpy as her mind recalled the incidents of the last two days. Her chest felt tight—as if the lungs lacked oxygen, while her heart thudded painfully against her rib cage like an unwilling prisoner begging to be let out.

But suddenly her ears picked up another noise; louder than her beating heart and closer than the storm. It was the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs behind her. This time the footsteps were so well defined that she could make out that one leg was heavier than the other. It sounded like it was dragged up the stairs with an extra effort, making a loud thudding sound. She knew if she gave in to the fear, hysteria will set in and she wouldn't be able to stop spiraling down into a terrifying abyss of fear. She resolved to leave the room and go back to the staircase to face the origin of the sound—that being the most logical thing to do.

She wanted to go out and assure herself that she was alone in the house and that there was nothing strange going on. But somehow, her legs refused to move a muscle and her instinct refused to agree with her. She stood like a statue in that room with her back turned towards the bedroom door.

It was exactly then that she heard the creak that made her blood freeze. That familiar sound happened only when someone stepped on the fourth stair on the way up. There was a loose board that made the creaking noise.

Slowly but very steadily, Ava could feel the strength of her willpower and rational thinking diminishing and a fear of something unknown and unseen started to take its place.

“STOP IT!” Ava chided herself aloud. “Granted that I am in a new country, a new house, but if storms started frightening me so much, very soon they are going to lock me up in an asylum.”

Attempting a casual attitude and putting on the bravest face she could muster, she moved on to the next bedroom. There she found all the three panels of the bay window open and the rain was pouring in through the windows spoiling the loveseat in front of it. Ava rushed to the window and tried to pull the lever that closes it. The room faced the hills at the back of the house. On other days Ava used to love the picturesque view from that room. But that day there was just something different; the hill looked larger, ominous even. Through the rain, the forest looked nearer—almost right outside the window. While the darkness from the hill tried to pour itself inside the bedroom like a shroud of murky mist nearly choking the very air in and around the room.

Refusing to give in to the fear of dread that Ava felt seemed to follow her through out the house, she reached for the lever and started to pull the window inwards. Suddenly she felt that familiar chill again. This time her body started to shiver uncontrollably. She could see as a reflection on the half closed glass window pane, a figure. A figure that was watching her every movement; a pair of cold piercing eyes was staring into the very core

of her soul. Ava the atheist, the non-believer knew that all it would take for everything to change would be her turning around. If she turned around, and realized that it wasn't a hallucination of sorts, that it wasn't a figment of her imagination, things would never go back to normal. All her logic, her scientific mind, in fact she herself will end at that moment. And so she made the courageous decision of disregarding her vision and kept attempting to close the window which had somehow gotten stuck.

The rain lashing at her face made it very difficult for her to keep her eyes open. Closing her eyes she started pulling the window inwards very hard. Her shivers started getting worse. But Ava did not give up; she gathered every bit of strength that she had in her to pull the lever and get the window closed. Fortunately right at that moment, the stuck window swung around and Ava could close it easily, as if it had not been stuck in the first place. Ava was taken aback. It was totally unexpected. But now came the toughest part. How could she turn around and see face to face the figure that was reflected on the window a just a moment ago? Thankfully, she glanced at the glass pane once more and realized that there was nothing behind her.

In spite of that she didn't want to rush it and started turning around slowly with her eyes closed--swallowing, trying to get rid of the dryness in her throat. She did not know what to expect, what she would see with open eyes. She opened her eyes slowly; just a slit at first, when that was satisfactory, she slowly moved her eyelids upwards and finally opened her eyes wide.

Sighing with relief at the absence of the specter, Ava kept the lights on in the room and left. But before she could take even five steps away from the room, she heard a loud crash originating from there. She jumped up—a flash of panic rushing through her. Her mind instantly taking her back to the moment when she thought she saw a figure behind her. The strange fear that she had started to become familiar with crawled back with ease and settled down all over her mind and body making her unable to move once again.

After a couple of moment of being completely frozen to the spot, Ava with grim determination turned around and went back into the room to investigate the origin of the loud noise.

The curtains were flying and a wooden flower vase had been knocked to the floor. For just a fraction of a second Ava felt relieved knowing that it was a very natural accident. But as she bent down to pick up the vase, the tiny hair behind her nape stood up; she realized that there can be no breeze for the curtains to fly in a room where she personally had locked the windows just a few moments back.

She slowly got up holding the vase in her hand--a hard lump forming in her throat. She was afraid, really afraid this time.

*Just get out, Get the Hell OUT NOW, and wait for Arul. Wait for him, don't look back.* Her mind screamed at her with the survival instinct kicking in were some of the thoughts that kept on bombarding her mind. This time Ava knew instinctively that she was not going to be as lucky as all the times earlier, she was convinced that this time she was indeed going to see something bloodcurdling.

In spite of the overwhelming fear, Ava reasoned with herself as best as she could. "I am a science student" she muttered under her breath. "There is nothing to fear, there must be a logical cause for the vase to fall." However not any logic in the world could have explained the simple but horrific sight that met her eyes. The lace curtains were fluttering

merrily in a breeze that was nonexistent. This time she could see with her own eyes that the windows were still tightly closed.

Stunned, Ava found herself rooted to the same position just watching the curtains fly all over. In the background, the eerie howling of the wind seemed to engulf the house in a creepy sonata. Ava felt faint and nauseas; the room seemed to be spinning around her. "What's happening to me?" she whispered.

A moment before she almost lost consciousness, the sound of the doorbell ringing brought as much relief to her as the sound of water gurgling brings to a thirsty and lost traveler in the middle of a desert.

Ava turned around and fled the room as if she was being followed by a thousand demons. Her sole objective at that time was to get away from the room and open the front door against all obstacles.

However the moment she reached the front door, she halted--terrifying thoughts running through her mind. *Oh my God! What if it's not Arul?* She thought dismayingly. She didn't remember hearing the jeep, although generally the noise it made could be heard from any part of the house. Her hand gripped the knob; a slight turn would be enough to open the door to anything that was lurking for her outside. She was not sure whether she wanted to open the door because she remembered reading somewhere that vampires could only come inside the house if they were invited. *But is it true for every other supernatural being,* wondered Ava.

While her mind was in turmoil with these hundred questions, she heard Arul's impatient voice. "Oii! Could you hurry up, the rain is drenching me here!"

She hurriedly opened the door and almost collapsed in Arul's arms; never before had she been as happy to see Arul as then.

Arul, totally oblivious to everything else was shaking the rain off his clothes, when he felt Ava's strong hug that almost knocked him off his feet. Surprised, he lifted his head and saw Ava's face. It was neither a look that he had seen before nor a look that he would want to see in the future; worry made his heart race against his chest.

"Ava what is it? Honey! Are you ok? What happened? Is everything ok?"

The questions flowed as fast as a machine gun shooting bullets. Arul took the shaking and shivering Ava in his arms and hugged her tightly, while rubbing the back of her dress for warmth since she was as drenched as he was. Through it all Ava was blabbering something about curtains and wind and Arul couldn't make out a word though he tried hard enough to understand the cause that had terrorized his dear wife.

"Whoa, slow down. Take a deep breath. I can't understand a word darling. Lets start from the beginning," said Arul looking anxiously at Ava's ghostly pale face.

Her face was almost white. Her lips were a shade of grayish blue. The frightened look in her eyes almost broke his heart. Her hair was disheveled and wet; her face was wet too, with streaks of water marks running down her cheek. He didn't know whether they were tears or water.

But one thing Arul was certain about. Ava was not the kind of person to get scared easily. He really wanted to know the reason--he *needed* to know the reason. Once she was enveloped in Arul's arms, Ava felt safe and calmed down slowly. Then, taking a deep breath she tried to explain to him the cause for her fear; but before she even began,

she realized it would be better if Arul saw it with his own eyes. She caught his hand and dragged him to the room where it had all happened.

There was nothing. Everything was perfectly normal; the curtains that had disturbed Ava so terribly were hanging still. The only sound was that of the howling wind. Arul looked at Ava with questioning eyes. Ava looked back. She understood that it was pointless explaining her source of fear to Arul. He was not there; he wouldn't be able to comprehend the suffocating fear a pair of fluttering curtains can cause in a human mind. She turned away, feeling defeated, knowing that it was futile to even try to explain. Arul only understood the language of science, and as long as she couldn't explain the occurrences in terms of science and logic, she would always be alone with her fear.

Ava sighed and hugged Arul back. "I am very tired and was worried for you" said Ava calmly as she didn't want to pursue the subject further. "Let's go down and eat something." She started going down the stair, followed by a very puzzled and mystified Arul.

Arul understood that there was something major that Ava was not telling him. But being married to Ava for a few years, he also knew that it is no use pushing her for the truth. She will tell him about it only when she wanted to talk about it--*if* she did talk about it at all. He shrugged his shoulders and started giving Ava a hand to set the table for a very late lunch.

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 6

Noraini's only thought after leaving the doctor's residence, was to get back home fast as the storm clouds started covering the blue sunny sky rapidly. She knew that the fastest way to the other side of the island where she lived, was a shortcut through hills at the back of the house. Unfortunately, she had never taken the path before and was not too sure whether she would actually be able to follow it back to her village.

However, looking towards the sky she noticed great thick clouds drifting rapidly in towards the island. The signs of the coming storm were there. Whichever way she looked. It was as if Nature itself was leaving clues around the hills and the sea to warn people of the fury of the approaching storm.

Noraini understood that if she did not take the short cut, she would not be able to get back home before the storm started, which meant she would have to take shelter somewhere during her journey. It was definitely not an appealing option to her, especially after her experience in the doctor's house. Moreover, she was worried about her children alone at home. So reluctantly, in spite of not being very familiar with trail through the woods, she decided to take a chance if that meant she had a possibility of reaching home faster.

There wasn't really a well defined road through the hills. It was just a very crude trail that was visible only because the grass looked more worn out than its surroundings. She had to follow the trail very carefully as a moment's doubt or misstep could result in losing her way completely in the dense rainforest.

Noraini walked briskly determined to reach home as soon as she could. The overgrown creepers and vines got caught in her *Baju Kurung* but this did not deter her. She was uncaring about anything else, apart from her urgency to reach home before the storm.

When she was almost mid-way, deep inside the forest trying to keep a close watch on the trail, she felt someone pulling the sleeve of her blouse from behind. She stopped still—rooted to the ground; her mind sending out chaotic messages of panic and fear. Noraini could feel beads of cold sweat that slowly started to trickle down her forehead. She couldn't help but remember how she had upset the spirit back in the house earlier. The sudden chill in her bones convinced her that it was the spirit that had followed her to the woods and is now holding her arm, pulling her towards it---towards the abyss of some unknown agony.

Suddenly, taking a short cut through the middle of the hills did not seem like a good idea. Terrifying thoughts started running through her mind; frightening visions of malevolent specters hiding behind the tree trunks started to run through her already panicked mind.

Noraini knew that the time had come for her to face the entity. Sooner or later it would have to happen. She began to chant a little prayer under her breath. She hoped that would be able to save her from the clutches of the evil spirit—get her through those agonizing moments. She was certain that she was in the last few moments of her life. After all, she has had firsthand experience of the wrath of vengeful spirits from the time her mother

was alive. From the days when she used to help her mothers with the various rituals to help the villagers. She wished fervently that somehow the entity from beyond the grave would show her some form of mercy and spare her life.

She took a deep breath and turned around expecting the worst. What she saw made her laugh. She laughed loud and long; her laughter echoing through the forest. She couldn't help herself; she knew she was probably treading onto the boundaries of hysteria but she was not in the least bit bothered, as she let the cool feeling of relief wash over her like spring water on a hot day. For the first time in her life, relief gave her a heady sense of intoxication like the fix of some anti-depressant.

Slowly though she calmed down and freed her sleeve from the branch of a thorny bush to which it had got stuck. The sleeve tore and she had a deep scratch on her forearm. However she didn't mind; she was just so relieved to know that she was not really being followed by a ghost.

After the incident she decided to slow down and look carefully where she was going. She didn't want a repetition of the occurrence. After all she couldn't afford to have her dress torn up. The trail was really overgrown at some parts. Here and there broken tree trunks had fallen and Noraini found herself scrambling clumsily on to them to get to the other side.

Gradually, the air started getting exceedingly cold. The clouds had covered the entire sky making the idea of a sunny day seem like a faraway fantasy. It had gotten quite dark inside the forest. There was the rustling sound of the leaves and the wind whistled through the forest with a haunting tune. Soon it started becoming more and more difficult to stick to the trail. It wasn't long before Noraini realized that she had lost the trail. The path seemed to get softer, like it was covered with mud. Her feet sank deeper and deeper into a ground covered with moss, grass, dead and decomposed leaves.

The wind grew stronger and started blowing with an ever-increasing force that seemed to push her back till she almost tripped and fell. By now the rain had started falling fast and hard; every drop that fell on her was as sharp and painful as an arrow. The air had gotten icy cold. She could hardly keep her eyes open in the rain; every now and then it felt as if the heavens tore apart by vivid lightening.

In those flashes she could see the great mass of trees all standing like giant soldiers against the lashing of the rain. Noraini took shelter under the trees waiting for the worst to get over. Standing below a huge cedar tree, she suddenly recollected what her mother used to say about the trees in the jungle.

These trees that have been around for a very long time, unchanged and unmoved for centuries were where all the unclean spirits and demons of the other world lived. Hidden among the branches of the mute gigantic trees dwelt evil that had the power of destroying the earth if they had not been bound by the fear of God.

Remembering her mother's words made Noraini's heartbeats increase to an extent where she felt that she could actually hear the thudding of her heart, drowning the noise of the storm around her. She could feel her temples throbbing painfully while the blood flowed through the veins in her forehead. When with fearful eyes she glanced at the trees around her, she was sure she was being watched by the baleful spirits, waiting to get her when the moment was right. As much as she tried to think of other things, each and every frightening tale of the various ghostly encounters that the villagers had gone through in the forests on days like this kept on tormenting her mind.

Soon the blackness of the storm started merging with the darkness of the evening. She knew she had to get out of the woods. She was not strong enough or brave enough to fare a stormy night in the woods. She started groping around from tree to tree trying to find some sign that would lead her back to the trail. God must have been on her side that evening because she found the trail once again by pure luck.

As she tried to look around for the path, she tripped on an empty soft drink can that someone had thrown there and fell hard against a log that had fallen on the ground. In doing so she hit the side of her head quite badly. Lying there with her face hanging upside down from the log, she thought she saw something. Disoriented and giddy, she quickly sat up in spite of the throbbing headache that was tearing through her skull.

In the very dim evening light she could make out the trail once again. This time it was a lot more defined and she realized that she must be a lot closer to her village, because this part of the path looked a lot more traveled than the earlier part. Noraini picked up her pace, almost running, unheeding the pelting rain and the deafening thunder.

All she wanted was to get back home. She was soaked through her bones and was shivering. Her teeth were chattering in rhythm with her shivers. When finally she saw the familiar road to her home she almost screamed with joy.

She rushed into her house where she was greeted by the worried faces of her three daughters who were anxiously waiting for her to come back. She hugged the three of them tightly squeezing her eyes shut and thanking God for getting her back home safely.

Her eldest daughter Zuleha looked at her with questioning eyes, seeing the blood on Noraini's forehead. Noraini gave her a quick smile trying to assure her that everything was alright and rushed to the bathroom for a quick bath and to clean her little wounds not wanting to worry her children.

The storm was at its height. The gale bending the trees till they almost touched the ground, the rain pouring as if the dam gates of a river has been opened, the rumbling of thunder sounded like the deep growl of a monster. It really was one of the worst storms that the island had seen in years.

After having a quick bath Noraini made herself a cup of tea and just stared at the rain, still thinking of the incident at the doctor's house. She hoped that she would be able to protect herself in the future.

That night after dinner, Noraini put her three children to bed a little earlier than usual. Waiting till they were all fast asleep, she went into her room and locked the door. She did not want to be disturbed during the ritual. There was no electricity as the storm had knocked down a power line and she had to grope around to find the latch to lock the door.

She lived in a small house with two tiny bedrooms. One was where the children slept and the other one was her room. It was a very old house where the walls were dangerously cracked in quite a few places; there were leaks in the ceiling and during heavy rains she had to put buckets under those leaks so that the rain water could drip into the buckets instead of spoiling the furniture. Of course there wasn't much expensive furniture to spoil—it was a struggle just to put food on the table for her family; thinking about furniture was a long way off.

The living room consisted of an odd array of unmatched chairs; a well worn out wooden table and a cupboard with hinges hanging out. There was a small area off the living room that acted as the dining area with a round wooden table and five wooden chairs. The kitchen was just a narrow corridor at the back of the house consisting of a gas stove and the essential utensils.

Noraini looked around her bedroom; she hoped that what she had decided to do will actually work.

There in the corner of the room was a small wooden trunk with a huge lock on it. Noraini took the key out from under her mattress and opened the trunk. It had almost been four years since she had opened it. It was her mother's; inside it were effects that her mother used during various rituals involving the supernatural. There were strange herbs and roots along with different colored cloths, iron talismans and other odds and ends that were needed for the rituals.

She took out several partially burnt thick, black candles from the trunk and lighted them at key parts of the room; namely the corners, the windows, the door and in a circle in the middle.

This was the first time she was getting ready to make a form of protective talisman all by herself. Noraini had never attempted to do it alone before. But knew these were desperate times. On one hand she needed the job more than anything else. But on the other hand, she couldn't possibly be in that house without some form of protection—not especially since she had angered the spirit with her stupidity.

Noraini was hesitant because although she knew how to make a protective talisman, she was not sure how strong the talisman that she made would be against the wrath of the spirit. Keeping that in mind, she also decided to make a charm with the holy herbs and bury it near the back door of the laundry room to keep the spirit at bay. To bar it from roaming freely around the other parts of the house. While arranging everything necessary for the ritual, she wondered how she was going to bring up the topic of cleansing the house with Ava; she was aware that city folks did not believe in such things and it might jeopardize her job.

But first things first, thought Noraini, putting aside her dilemma. She collected the things went to sit in the middle of the circle surrounded by the burning candles. The circle was a form of fortification during the ritual; it was supposed to act as a barrier between the spirit and the person till such time when the person was already wearing the talisman. After keeping every thing in the centre of the circle Noraini realized that she had forgotten to take '*kemayan*', the fragrant, crystalline powder that when burnt caused thick smoke and a strong smell similar to that of joss sticks. In most of the Asian cultures, it was believed to keep ghostly entities away.

She got up and went back to look for a packet of '*kemayan*' inside the trunk. She rummaged through everything in the trunk. But it was nowhere to be found; although she was sure that she had seen some inside the trunk before. She knew its importance and with a burst of new urgency she doubled her search efforts.

Suddenly, in the middle of her desperate search she experienced a drastic change in the temperature of the room. She could see her breath coming out in misty smoke as if she was in the arctic instead of in a tropical island and that too indoors.

The atmosphere of the room also seemed to have undergone a transformation---the flickering candlelight casting dark shadows on the walls looked like the silent dance of

countless demons. There was an overpowering sense of negativity around. Noraini knew that something was amiss; her heart, responding to an unknown instinct started thumping painfully against her ribcage. When she heard a low growl behind her, she understood that this time it was not the baseless fear that she had felt in the woods. This time it was for real.

It took every ounce of her will power to turn around. But she did turn around, knowing that she needed to be brave if not for herself, then for her children. She knew that if she did not confront this thing now, it would get stronger because of her fear, and perhaps hurt her children to get back at her. It was a time when her maternal instincts took over and with a grim resolve she turned around thinking that natural or supernatural, if anything caused an iota of harm to her children, she is going to rip it apart with her bare hands. Thus with the boost of adrenaline running through her, Noraini faced her nemesis.

However, all the courage and willpower in the world was not enough and could not have prepared Noraini for what was in front of her.

It was sitting right in the middle of the protective circle that Noraini had created for herself; a woman, sitting cross-legged with her head down, giggling in a low eerie voice as though trying not to wake the children.

Her knotted and scraggly long black hair had fallen on both sides of her face—almost covering it. She slowly lifted her head looking right at Noraini. And for the first time Noraini felt like she was caught awake in a terrible nightmare that could only end with her death.

The face was ghastly pale with an ash grey skin tone of corpses that have been dead for weeks. The apparition was accompanied by an unbearable stench that seemed to fill every crevice of the room, Noraini found herself gagging just to avoid vomiting right there while her breath started getting more labored. She was extremely dizzy and could hardly hold her head straight; as though she was in the middle of a rollercoaster ride. Her body froze with fear when she suddenly found herself drawn into the apparition's bloodshot eyes against her own will.

The entity smiled menacingly; baring her bluish yellow teeth, jagged like that of a shark's. She looked at Noraini with such vehemence that Noraini unknowingly started leaning backwards trying to find support against the wooden trunk. Unconsciously she clutched her chest trying to slow down the beating of her painful heart was that threatened to burst out of her chest and fall to the ground.

She realized that she was facing probably one of the most powerful spirits to have ever crossed paths with a human. For no ordinary spirit would be capable of entering a sacred circle meant to protect; *why oh why did I have to be that unfortunate person?* She thought Terror engulfed Noraini till she felt like she was hanging in a zone where time had stopped. There was no yesterday, no tomorrow; only now, and only an utter hopeless all-encompassing fear. She was certain that those were her last few moments alive and above everything else, she was filled with an ocean of sadness knowing that she won't be seeing her children again.

The spirit's giggles turned into a sweltering ghostly laughter that could stop the heart of even the bravest of all men. Slowly while sitting cross-legged she started levitating above the ground. Strong winds filled the room making the tattered flimsy curtains on the windows fly crazily against the walls producing a flapping sound in the background that seemed to be a chorus to the symphony of the ghostly laughter.

When Noraini almost going insane tried to block the noise—closing her ears tightly by putting her palms over them, the apparition started to speak.

In a raspy voice she whispered the words in a language that Noraini couldn't understand although it sounded strangely familiar to her. Every word the spirit spoke was filled with such wrath, such hatred, that it felt like a physical blow. It sounded more like the hiss of a cobra that had raised its hood in retribution, rather than the voice of any human or anything that even remotely resembles a word spoken by humans. Noraini did not need to understand the words to understand, that she was staring at death.

The ghostly figure stood up in thin air and pointed a scrawny dirty finger at her and screamed. "Stay away! Stay away from them. They are mine. Nothing in this world is going to keep me away from them."

She glared at Noraini with a knowing look, as though she knew what Noraini was about to do—had she not been interrupted half way. Through her bloodshot eyes the spirit issued a formal challenge to Noraini to dare to stand on the path of her wrath against Ava and Arul.

While repeating the words like a ghostly chant, the figure started spinning around faster and faster till she was nothing but a whirlwind swirling above the ground. Suddenly she stopped spinning; with her face towards the door and her back towards Noraini. Every sound within the room seemed also to come to an abrupt stop. At the next moment, Noraini gazed in horror as the bones of the spirit's neck started to creak and the abomination turned its head towards Noraini at an angle that was impossible. Because her face turned towards Noraini at an hundred and eighty degrees while the rest of her body faced the opposite direction. Terrified, Noraini didn't know how to look away.

"There is nothing that you can do to harm me. But there is a lot I can do." She said with a spooky smile that revealed her fang-like teeth. Then with a rush of sudden wind she vanished.

The sudden rush of wind blew off all the candles. At exactly the same time Noraini could hear her youngest daughter crying and calling her. It was as if her feet got rid of its paralysis finally and she ran to her children's bedroom.

She saw her five year old daughter sitting up on the bed and pointing towards the window. "Ibu *sana!*" (Mummy there) "Sana *ada!*" (It's there).

Noraini rushed and took her little girl in her arms. While rocking her and trying to calm her down Noraini could hear the identical eerie laugh that she had heard earlier.

She realized that she would have to get up early the next morning to make *Nasi Lemak* and Curry puffs so she could be prepared for the breakfast crowd in front of the small roadside stall.

She would not go back to that house. She knew that she may be offered a higher salary to stay on; but as tempting as it sounded, nothing was more precious to her than her children. She understood that it was the love for her children that had actually given her the strength to have survived the ordeal that she had just been through.

She didn't know what the spirit was talking about or why it had chosen the doctor and his wife as its victims. But she realized just for her children's sake, she needed to be selfish and think about herself and her family first. Let everyone else tend for themselves she thought as realization dawned on her that life was short and she had almost lost hers that night.

## Chapter 7

Arul was not sure when the nightmares had become a regular occurrence. Like uninvited guests, they came every night and he was powerless to stop them. The images were blurry in his mind; he couldn't remember the dreams when he was awake although he woke up from them in a cold sweat; his silent screams reverberating through his mind—waking him up in the middle of the night. Frightened and confused; remembering the fear but not remembering the dream.

But, in his sleep the visions were so clear—so vivid, torturing him, taunting him, making him beg for mercy, inflicting an ever-repeating anguish in his subconscious night after night till he started feeling scared to go to sleep.

Sleep became a long forgotten luxury as the fear of his nightly ordeals turned into an agony. Despite that, his professional ego stopped him from discussing his nightmares with anyone, especially Ava. He was worried that the invincible macho image he had always portrayed in front of her would become tarnished.

*Am I being arrogant?* He pondered. *Maybe, but for now I think I will solve it on my own.*

But unfortunately, all that tossing and turning on his side of the bed through out the night was tormenting his body mercilessly. He started his mornings feeling more and more exhausted; feeling as though he had been fighting off an entire army by himself the whole night. His health started to suffer and such disturbed sleep made him feel very irritable throughout the day.

*I need more exercise.* Concluded Arul. *Sitting at one place in the clinic is actually making me have such sleeping disorders.* The doctor in him made a resolution of getting some form of exercise regularly. *Perhaps once there is certain amount of exercise, the physical exhaustion will help me sleep better,* he thought hopefully.

Thus finding a tentative solution to the problem he started getting ready for work. Carefully as always dressing up to portray the professional confidence of a doctor, Arul put on one of his favorite shirts--light blue with thin navy blue stripes, an Alan Deloin tie and his grey Valentino slacks. He finished his routines and slapped on some of his favored Drakkar Noir aftershave. He always felt that these little drills helped him feel better in the mornings after those nightly horrors.

The soft touch of the cotton of his shirt or the perfect knot of his tie, and even the fresh tangy smell of his aftershave, helped him draw a better line between reality and his nightmares. It assured him that all these little things were part of his life. The nightmares were ....well.... just nightmares.

In the dining room, Ava was already sitting on her chair cross-legged—her favorite sitting position. She was leafing through the morning papers while fiddling with her mug of coffee and holding a slice of buttered toast. Arul pulled up the chair in front of her and took a sip from his already prepared coffee.

“Ava, I may be back a little late today.” said Arul spreading butter on his toast.

Ava looked up from the newspaper with a frown on her face. “Huh? Why?”

“A consignment of medicines is coming in today from the mainland. I have to sort through them and get everything organized.”

“But I thought that was Vasantha’s job.” enquired Ava impatiently.

“Yes that’s true. But you know she is not one of the brightest nurses that I have worked with and I don’t want her to make mistakes with labeling the medicines.” Arul answered moodily.

He realized that not having proper sleep at nights was really making him exceedingly edgy. For the past one week he had been quite testy. He had noticed that Ava’s attitude towards him had also changed; she was more indifferent to him and was becoming quite snappy as well.

“Suit yourself,” said Ava shrugging her shoulders.

Arul picked up his stethoscope and his bag and left for the site without saying goodbye.

Arul had been given a small clinic at the logging site. It was nothing fancy. Just a small cottage built temporarily for the purpose of having a clinic, as it was a mandatory requirement for any logging company. There was a porch that was almost twenty feet long in front that housed a few wooden benches scattered along it. Inside, there was a hall and two rooms.

The hall served as a reception cum dispensary. On one side there was a wooden table and a chair. While on the other side there were very large wooden shelves with glass doors lining the wall. That was where all the prescription medicines were kept; this was Vasantha’s domain as aside from being the receptionist she was also in charge of dispensing the medicines.

The first room was where Arul saw his patients. His room consisted of a narrow bed on one side, a steel desk, a chair for him and two on the opposite side for his patients. A cupboard behind him consisted of all his medical equipments.

The second room consisted of two hospital beds. That was there just for emergency purposes, like in case someone at the site met with a serious accident or God forbid was diagnosed with of critical illnesses. Secretly, Arul thought that in case of such incidents, the bed was the least important part, the other things that he would need to perform a surgery were definitely unavailable in the island.

Vasantha was a local young girl. About 22 years old. She had dropped out of college after completing first year of a graduate course. She used to study in a university in the mainland. Why she dropped out, was not something that Arul was aware of—nor was he curious to know. Her educational background just made her the most suitable candidate in the island to be a doctor’s assistant.

Unfortunately, even though her English was quite good, she had absolutely no medical background. Moreover most of the time she looked as if she was in a world of her own; dreaming away. Needless to say, it was extremely difficult to get something done by her in the first attempt. Arul was used to working with professional and qualified nurses and sometimes he could feel his patience hanging by a thin thread when he needed to explain the simplest of all things to her.

The medicines arrived very late that afternoon. Arul had been waiting for them the whole day; he was quite annoyed when the consignment was brought in at almost four in the afternoon. The moment the couriers unloaded the huge cardboard boxes, he started sorting through it along with Vasantha.

All logging works stopped by six in the evening. One by one everyone started leaving the site. Arul could hear the loggers singing and joking when passing the clinic on their way back, relieved to have finally reached the end of their hard labor for the day. Arul could see the forlorn look on Vasantha's face as she helped him sort out the boxes while Faizal waited outside sitting on one of the benches reading a newspaper; waiting for Arul to finish, so that he could drive him back and then go home himself.

By the time it was seven in the evening, almost everybody had left the site except the three of them. After the last few loggers walked past the clinic chattering indistinctly, the entire site quietened down. Vasantha kept looking at the wall clock every two minutes. Arul understood that she was waiting to get back home to her family or she probably had a date. Knowing that it was getting late and she would have to walk back alone, Arul decided to give her a break.

"It's ok. I think I will finish this by myself," said Arul pointing at the cardboard boxes that were yet to be sorted out. "You go ahead."

"But sir can you manage by yourself?" Vasantha asked anxiously.

Although she was relieved by Arul's sudden kindness, her conscience understood how very irresponsible it would be on her part to leave in the midst of so much work. After all Arul was her boss.

Arul had a sudden urge to laugh out loud. Here she was creating more problems than solving them, misspelling every word and spilling more tablets than putting them in the bottles, and yet she was so conscientious about leaving him to finish up.

"Oh yes! I can manage. Anyway, if I can't do it right, then you can always come back and sort it out yourself tomorrow morning." said Arul barely suppressing a smile.

Vasantha thanked him profusely and quickly gathered her things in a matter of thirty seconds, ready to go home. She reminded Arul of his favorite cartoon character the Road Runner with her speed. Arul thinking of the long walk she had to reach home, at a moment of generosity asked Faizal to drop her and come back.

The purple evening sky was already darkening towards a misty black. The clinic located in a cleared land in the middle of a dense forest where logging was currently taking place rendered a forlorn loneliness in the absence of any human buzz. The darkness of the jungle seemed to be hiding unwanted sights.

After Vasantha and Faizal left, Arul got back to his manual labor. Secretly, he was a little relieved that he wouldn't have to explain word by word to Vasantha at every step of the way. However, it wasn't easy taking stock of all the medical supplies, labeling them correctly, and arranging them according to their groups all by himself.

Soon, he started to feel exhausted. The lack of sleep was really taking a heavy toll on him. He decided to finish up the next day. He walked over to his desk, and sitting on his chair, closed his eyes—waiting for Faizal to come back.

*What was taking him so long? Thought Arul half annoyed. Perhaps he has gone to have his dinner seeing I am still going to take some time here.*

He was so tired that he could barely stay awake. Yawning widely, he thought he would put his head down on his desk and rest for a little while.

There came a sudden thudding sound from outside. It sounded like someone climbing the steps to the verandah. *It must be Faizal*, thought Arul. But he was puzzled because he didn't hear the sound of the jeep.

The sound of the sudden footsteps cutting through the stagnant silence made Arul realize how bleak and lifeless the clinic looked in the evenings, this was the first time he had stayed back alone in the clinic after dark. Even the lighting was not sufficient. The solitary bulb in the room was throwing long shadows in the corners, making the room even bleaker.

*No wonder Vasantha is always in a hurry to go back home and hardly finishes anything I give her to do in the evenings.* Thought Arul emphatically.

He got up and walked briskly to the front to greet Faizal. But there was no one in sight. Arul was bewildered and looked all around; he could have sworn that he heard the sound of footsteps although he couldn't see anybody. The silence was so intense that even the sound of the rustle of a leaf would be heard, so Arul was certain that he had not imagined the footsteps.

It was a full moon night. Though the moon was still low on the eastern horizon, its silvery orange beam bathed the surrounding forest in a magical light; the trees looked dipped in silver. A few lazy clouds framed the luminescent moon enhancing the beauty of the night sky.

The small slice of the sea that was visible from the steps of the clinic looked like shimmering mercury. Arul felt a kind of peace that he had not felt in a very long time. The earlier uneasiness, seemed to evaporate in the tranquil surrounding—an unknown lethargy slowly started to take over him.

A sudden rustling of the leaves made Arul look carefully towards the trees. Looking hard towards the forest he could barely make out a figure walking through the trees in a pretty strange manner. In the moonlight the figure looked pale, shimmering and flickering almost like a mirage. From a distance it almost looked like it was floating on air rather than walking. He climbed down the steps to find out who it was. However the closer he got to the trees, the farther the figure went. Till he finally lost sight of it.

*Who would be walking through at this hour in the forest?* Thought Arul surprised.

“Hello is anyone there?” he shouted. There was no answer. All he could hear, was a faint echo of his own voice.

The only other sounds were of the crickets chirping and the occasional ‘whooo, whoooo’ cries of an owl out to catch dinner. Out of the blue, he could hear the mournful howling of a pack of dogs. The far away spooky sound drifted through the forest creating a sinister atmosphere. Arul decided to head back to the clinic and wait for Faizal. He had a sudden uneasy feeling that something was not right.

The moment he reached the verandah he felt a shiver run up his spine, his heart started thumping fast. There was someone standing in the shadows there on the verandah. Arul couldn't make the features or whether it was the same figure that he saw earlier in the woods. But the way the person stood, and through the height, Arul knew that it was a woman.

The stench coming from her was overwhelming. It was suffocating to the extent that he felt like he was trying to breathe through a plastic bag. It was a very familiar smell, but he was unable to place it at that moment.

Arul had never felt a fear like this before. His throat was closing up, he wanted to scream, but only a sort of muffled sound came out. Suddenly the figure grabbed his wrists; it was a woman as Arul had thought. Her hands were ice cold. She held his wrists so hard that it almost felt like his wrists were going to snap under the pressure. Like the sound of dried leaves blowing in the wind, she threatened in a raspy voice.. “I am going to kill you. I am going to destroy you and your wife till you are nothing but ashes. You made a terrible mistake. Now you have to pay for It.” she screamed.

Arul was drowning in the raging anger of her voice. He shivered at the intensity of her wrath.

At that instant, the moon came out from behind the clouds where it had been hiding for the last couple of minutes; leaving Arul with no choice but to see the face of perhaps his worst nightmares. At exactly the same moment, he recognized the stench that was coming from her. It was the stench of a dead and decomposed cadaver, a smell that he had become accustomed to when he used to perform autopsies at the morgue during his internship.

She looked Arul straight into his eyes, her face merely inches away from his; the foul smell entering his nostrils and mouth violating his senses. His trembling body was filled with such heaviness—like a huge boulder had been tied around his neck. Her eyes blazed with the fire of hatred and rage. Suddenly her skeletal hands tried to grab his throat in a choking death-like grip.

Arul screamed—his head jerked against the desk and he quickly sat up. He realized that he had dozed off. It was a terrible nightmare although it felt more real than anything he had experienced before. He was sweating profusely—his shirt sticking clammy to his back and his throat felt as dry as parchment paper.

He heard the sound of the approaching jeep rumbling outside and realized that Faizal had just got back. He quickly locked up everything and practically jumped into the jeep.

A puzzled Faizal could not help but ask “Is everything okay boss?”

“Yes! Just tired man... just tired.” replied Arul wearily, diffusing the situation before it warranted more questions.

He was thoroughly shaken; his heart still pounding away. Arul could not make any sense of the dream. He knew the scientific reasoning behind dreams were that they were merely manifestations of a person’s subconscious. But, he wondered, why was he thinking of her? Why now?

It wasn’t till he was half way home when he pulled up his sleeve to look at the time on his wrist watch that he saw the deep blue-black bruises on his wrists. They looked like the work of long and scraggly fingers that had held his wrists with a strength that could have crushed his delicate carpals.

Devastated, Arul realized that it was not a dream. Somehow the entire horrific incident had actually happened. The nightmares that he could not remember in the mornings had left a mark that he would never forget. The question was, will they stop? And if not, what was he going to do about it?

## Chapter 8

It had been a week since Noraini stopped coming. She had sent a note through one of her neighbors saying that she was sick and will not be able to carry out her duties for an indefinite amount of time.

Arul was quite surprised and annoyed at her attitude for sending just a mere note; to him Noraini had appeared to be perfectly healthy and fine when she came to their house. He couldn't believe that somebody could become so seriously ill within a few hours.

*I mean I should know that, I am a bloody doctor!* He thought angrily.

Ava on the other hand took the news as if she had been expecting it; all she did was smile grimly—a smile that left Arul more perplexed.

Gradually the relationship between Arul and Ava started becoming strained; words were spoken in harsh tones, silence filled the air and Ava spent more time on the settee outside sulking with tear filled eyes rather than with Arul when he was home.

It had all started three or four days back. Arul had come back from his clinic in the evening and found Ava snuggled up comfortably on the Balinese settee in the verandah with her lap top resting on her knees. She was glaring at the computer screen so intently that it felt like she would jump into the screen if she could.

Arul guessed that it must be something about her work that she was having trouble with. Whenever Ava was alone with her thesis, the outside world ceased to exist and predictably she had not seen Arul arrive.

In the glow of the setting sun, Ava looked like an exotic angel. Her beautiful eyes the color of melted chocolate, her straight hair framing her heart shaped face, her full pouty lips that she was biting from time to time trying to concentrate; made Arul stop in his steps. He observed her without letting her know that he was there. She was wearing a red summer dress that stopped just before it reached her knees and her shapely long legs stretched out in an inviting way.

*She is stunning. I am really lucky to have her as my wife. She is way out of my league-- don't know what she saw in me though.* He thought smiling ruefully.

Arul was suddenly hit by a wave of desire; he wanted to take her in his arms and make love to her all night.

Ava still caught in her own thoughts, heard footsteps on the wooden floor and looked up to see a grinning Arul. She recognized that smile at once---the smile that her husband had whenever he had something naughty on his mind—the smile that Arul thought made him look like a rakish rogue. But Ava thought otherwise. The smile didn't make him look anything like a rakish rogue---rather she found him really cute when he smiled like that.

Arul walked up to her, “Hey princess,” he said. “I am back from my battles. I have slain all the dragons on the way and have come to rescue you.” A suggestive wink and a grin lit up his face.

Ava answered as if following a cue. “My darling! My prince! You are here!” she said with ample melodrama throwing her arms wide open. “Oh! I have been waiting for centuries for someone to rescue me from this foul computer which has robbed me of my sanity. Tell me my handsome prince, how will I ever repay your kindness?” asked Ava her eyes too filled with mischief, a slow smile playing at the corner of her lips, letting him know that she was ready for whatever he had in mind.

“Well .... Let me see,” continued Arul. “There’s a lot you can do to repay my kindness. I will let you know as we go on, but let me start with this.” He said, jumping on the settee and lifting her up in a bear hug.

Ava taken completely by surprise started to laugh till the laughter turned to snorts—a sign that she was really excited about their amusing role-play.

Arul took her in his arms and started kissing her on the lips as the waves of desire conquered him. Ava kissed him back with a passion that clearly expressed her longing for him.

He groped behind her back trying to find the zipper of her dress while showering her with kisses on her lips, her throat, the side of her cheeks, her shoulders, making Ava moan with pleasure. She ran the palms of her hand up and down Arul’s back feeling his muscles contract and become taut with craving.

When Ava felt her dress slide down her shoulders, she knew dragons or not, Arul was definitely able to conquer the zipper at the back of her dress.

When the heat of passion was almost at its peak, Ava suddenly felt someone breathing down the back of her neck. The breath was icy cold—so cold that every breath felt like a sharp stab on her back. She could sense the hair on her nape stand up as the chilly feeling became almost painful. She shoved Arul aside and hastily turned back to see what had caused the chills.

“What was that?” She asked trying to cover her semi-nude body with the dress.

“What was what?” asked a confused Arul, who had by then stripped down to his boxers. He was completely oblivious to anything else apart from Ava and his desire for her.

“I just felt like there was someone breathing down my neck.” stammered Ava feeling an apprehension similar to what she had experienced the night she saw the curtains flying in a room with the windows closed. “It was icy cold. See, I got goose pimples.” she said showing her trembling hands to Arul.

“Ava relax,” said Arul patiently. “It was nothing. It must have been the breeze. With the sun setting, the air is getting colder. That’s all.”

He once again took her in his arms and gently pulled her dress away from her hands trying to continue where they had left off.

Ava knew something was amiss, but they had not been intimate in some time since most of the days after housework and her thesis, she got so tired that making love was the last thing on her mind. *And Arul was in such a romantic mood*, she thought. So putting her panic aside she gave in, although in somewhat a half hearted way.

However, while she was in the middle of kissing Arul, she suddenly felt someone jab her with a long sharp finger.

“Arul!” she jumped up. “I felt something; it was like someone poked me.”

“Ava,” said Arul, now running out of patience. “Who is going to poke you when there is no one here besides you and me?”

Ava’s face turned red. She pushed Arul aside and started slipping into her dress while her anger and frustration started rising for not being taken seriously.

“Why don’t you believe me?” she asked Arul exasperatedly. “Do you think I am lying? Huh? Do you think that I have nothing better to do than sit around and find different ways of lying to you?”

“I don’t know Ava. It sounds absurd.” said Arul in a quiet voice. “If you really didn’t want me touch you, you should have just said so. You didn’t have to make up such preposterous stories. You are quite bad at lying my dear.” He looked at her with a thin smile and walked off leaving Ava standing alone on the verandah.

While changing from his office clothes, Arul started thinking about Ava’s behavior lately; he didn’t know exactly what was going on, but something just didn’t seem right. After the haunting nightmare at the site the other day, even he had started to feel uneasy. A feeling of unexplainable and unknown dread seemed to overwhelm him. It was as if something was just taking its time and waiting to trap Arul in its web.

That was the beginning of things deteriorating between Ava and Arul. They had both become very withdrawn and the times they spent together were filled with tension. It was as if both of them were making an attempt to be civil to each other—to try and avoid arguments which were just waiting to boil over like a simmering pot of milk.

In a situation like that, as much as Arul wanted to talk about his nightmares or share his feelings of fear with Ava, he had no idea how Ava would react to it. Although he knew that everything was just in his mind, a figment of his imagination, he didn’t need any professional advice from her. Knowing Ava as well as he did, he was afraid that she would just give him a lecture filled with scientific facts and details of why humans have nightmares. Arul was aware of all the scientific reasoning—what he wanted was some sympathy. He wanted Ava to hug him and say that everything will be all right, wanted her to say that she will hold him every night to make sure that he goes to sleep feeling safe—he wanted her to understand his fear and love him in spite of that.

Unfortunately he was sure that it was definitely not the reaction he would get out of Ava—especially now that she seemed so moody and withdrawn. He knew that most probably she will be contemptuous and may even ask him to grow up and stop acting like a child. He missed her, missed their easy banter, their mutual teasing and heated intellectual discussions.

Ava on the other hand, was worried about the changes in Arul. He had unexpectedly in a matter of a week become a different person. He was quiet, reserved, lost in his own world and always answered all her direct questions with an air of impatience; a hint of sarcasm. She wanted to know what was wrong with him but didn’t think that she could endure a session of a *‘psychiatric evaluation of what is wrong with him.’*

She had her own problems. She was very uncomfortable in the house by herself. There always seemed to be someone following her around; things started to go missing and end up in the most unlikely of all places. Of all things that made her feel uneasy, the thing that troubled her most was the fact that she was actually feeling so lost and scared. She didn’t like the feeling of helplessness or fear that grabbed her suddenly out of the blue

when she least expected it. She would switch off the lights in a particular room and come back to find them switched on; she could be doing something in the kitchen, and through the corner of her eyes she would see a shadow pass by---but when she turned around, no one would be there. This had happened quite often and its frequency was increasing at an alarming rate.

She remembered that she was the bravest among all her friends. During her college years, she had actually spent a night alone in a cemetery on a dare.

But now, Ava could not understand why a perfectly beautiful house, a scenic island and a wonderful life were being surrounded by a shadow of gloom. She didn't know what was happening to her and felt like she was losing her mind. *Was she under some kind of stress? What was the cause of her paranoia? Why did she feel so scared all the time?*

Many times she almost broke down and wanted to share her thoughts with Arul—so many times when she just wanted him to understand her fear. But she was afraid, afraid of the ridicule that she might be subjected to. She was unsure of his reaction. What if he laughed at her? What if he thought she was making all these up? What she dreaded the most was that he may actually believe her and think she was going crazy.

Neither of them could communicate their true feelings. Thus grew their resentment of each other as well as of their own weaknesses.

When he was at home, Arul would watch TV, surf the net or read his medical journals carefully trying to stay out of Ava's way. Ava spent her days concentrating on her thesis and doing general housework and feeling almost abandoned by Arul. They hardly did things together anymore. There was no conversations, no companionship and they both started living separate lives within the same house. Moody, lost and afraid.

The next quarter's medical budgets were coming up and Arul needed to go to the mainland to present his budget to the board of the directors for medical supplies. Apart from that the company directors had also expressed their wish to get to know him a little better; probably play a few games of golf and join them for dinner. The invitation was of course also extended to his wife.

Arul was very excited after his phone call with the executive director of the company. He rushed home to ask Ava to join him.

"Guess what? I need to go to the mainland for a couple of days." said Arul sitting down on the rattan sofa in the hall. "You can also come. In fact we have been invited over for dinner at the executive director's house. In the mornings when I am in office, you can shop and have a look around the town. I am sure you are fed up with just going to the market and *pasar malam* here. I know you must be tired of being in such a lonely place for so long." he added softly looking at her.

It sounded so good. For a moment a look of sheer joy passed over Ava's face, but then she thought over it. "No. I don't want to come." She said quietly, sitting opposite Arul on the single sofa.

Arul was shocked. He didn't expect this answer at all—in fact he had been looking forward to give her the news the whole day and rushed home earlier than usual just to see her joyous face when she hears the news. He thought Ava was going to be thrilled at the prospect of going somewhere for a mini vacation.

“But... but why?” He looked at her face, completely baffled.

“I am at a very key part in my thesis and I really don’t feel like going anywhere at the moment.” said Ava looking at the coffee table and not quite meeting Arul’s eyes. “You know me, I can never enjoy when I am not quite sure how to handle my work. I have to finish this part and since I have to juggle between housework and my thesis, I am actually falling behind my schedule for completion.” She looked up finally at Arul giving a weak smile---trying very hard to sound convincing.

Ava was not very comfortable with lying and had always been truthful and straightforward to a fault. She didn’t think that she could actually tell a lie and get away with it. But this time, she didn’t want to tell the truth to Arul.

*What would she say? That she is afraid that they may have arguments there in the close quarters of a hotel room? That she will feel stifled being there with all the tension that is separating them like a brick wall?* Ava knew that this meeting was very important to him. She didn’t want to be there feeling moody and unsocial.

But the most important reasons of all was that she wanted to stay back alone in the house. She wanted to defy her fear just like she had done years ago in that cemetery—for once and for all she wanted to overcome the scared feeling. She was sick of being uncomfortable in her own skin, sick of jumping at unknown things and sudden noises. She wanted to issue a challenge against whatever was tormenting her, whether it existed or not; she wanted to challenge her own fear. She thought by being alone she would be able to battle her own fears and hopefully get rid of it in those two days.

For so many reasons she felt that it was just better for her to stay back. Perhaps even they needed a break from each other. *Maybe when he got back things would be better, maybe he would be more cheerful.* Thought Ava optimistically.

Arul was hurt. He could feel his face turn crimson with anger; his ears burning up—something that happened only when he was truly angry or upset. However in spite of that he didn’t want to make a big issue out of it knowing that anything he said would end up in an argument.

So he pretended as if it really didn’t matter whether Ava followed him or not. He sighed, shrugged his shoulders and went off to have a shower, change and eventually shut himself off from any sort of communication with her for the rest of the day.

The next day Faizal arrived bright and early at 7.00am to take Arul to the airport. Cheerfully as always he greeted Ava who was in the verandah, and leaning against the jeep he waited for Arul to come. Arul came carrying his leather overnight suitcase and walked straight to the jeep.

Looking at Arul’s grim face Ava really felt sorry but was convinced that she did the right thing. She knew she was like a volcano which was waiting to erupt at any moment and being the eternal rationalist, she knew that she had to deal with her problems her way.

She waved at Arul enthusiastically wishing him a safe journey, but looking at his face she knew that he was still upset with her. He got into the jeep without uttering a single syllable, in fact without even looking towards Ava and asked Faizal to drive.

Sensing the tension between the couple Faizal pretended to look away and drove the jeep out of the driveway---for the first time without his cheerful smile.

Ava decided that since she had made an excuse of her thesis, she might as well sit and finish a part of it. She had been doing quite a bit of research over the last few days and had gathered most of her facts and had neatly compiled all her notes—sorting them out into various sections. Now she just had to type it; but it was easier said than done. It was a grueling task to sit down and type all those theories and hypothesis, not to mention sketching the diagrams and explaining her ideas while trying to make them sound simple and precise.

Her work took almost the entire morning to complete. Being a meticulous person Ava did not let anything distract her till she finished her job for the day. After she had hit the last key on the computer, she felt the angry rumbling of her stomach protesting against being kept unfed for so long.

Feeling hungry but a little lazy from working on the laptop for so long, Ava decided to fix herself a spicy tuna sandwich with lots of mayonnaise and cheese accompanied by a nice tall glass of iced tea. Bringing her lunch to the sofa in the hall, she put on a Hindi movie that she had bought sometime ago but didn't have the time to see before.

She was quite happy with her progress on her thesis for the day and also happy that she had not sensed anything unnatural. She didn't experience the feeling of gloom, nor did she think that someone was following her or lurking in the shadows. In fact, she was quite confident that it really was all in her mind.

*Thank God, I never mentioned anything about all these funny feelings to Arul*, she thought. Looks like I really did imagine them.

After the movie ended, Ava stretched out, made herself comfortable on the couch and closed her eyes intending to take a short nap. The cool breeze blowing in from the sea was so relaxing that towards the end of the movie she could hardly keep her eyes open in spite of it being a pretty entertaining film. After switching off the television and the DVD player, she dozed off on the couch and in no time she was snoring contentedly.

When she woke up, it was almost dark and she realized that she must have been sleeping for quite sometime. Through the glass doors overlooking the ocean she could see the deep purple sky; the sun had set a long time back leaving behind just a pale touch of gold and orange trail on its way to light up another part of the world with its brightness and warmth. The trees faraway were already black.

Ava got up hurriedly and switched on the lights in the hall. Opening the glass doors she came out on the patio and stood there, mesmerized by the sound of the roaring waves crashing against the rocks and spraying tiny droplets of salty white foam. The breeze had changed its direction and was blowing from the land towards the sea. There was no sign of life anywhere. She felt like a solitary survivor on a shipwrecked island.

Some shipwrecked island it is, she thought with a wry smile. An island with a beautiful house which scares me more than it comforts me.

Ava noticed that the feeling of depression and fear was gradually creeping up and spreading like a cancer through out her body. Her heart was beating a little faster than it should; as if it was anxious over something that her conscious mind was not aware of. She glanced uneasily towards all the shadowy corners of the garden—not sure what it was that she expected to see, but nevertheless gave a sigh of relief when everything seemed to be the same.

With dismay Ava gradually started grasping the fact that she was going to be alone in the house for two days and two nights. At that moment somehow, it didn't really feel like a good idea to fight her fears.

*Why am I thinking like this? What fear am I worrying about?* Wondered Ava, confused.

She closed the glass doors and stepped back inside the hall. The house was silent. It felt like everything including time had stopped; waiting for something to happen—*dreading* that something was about to happen.

“Get a hold of yourself.” Ava warned herself aloud, shaking her head.

At this rate she knew will be a nervous wreck before the next day and for no apparent reason. She put on a mixed CD of slow rock songs—choosing the particular CD knowing that the loud music would take away the feeling of loneliness. Within the next few seconds the sound of The Scorpions singing “*when the smoke is going down*” filled the air. She increased the volume loud enough so that every part of the house was filled with the tune. Feeling a lot better Ava went upstairs to take a nice long bath.

She allowed the tub to fill up to the brim before taking off her clothes and lowering herself into the scented water. She let the warm water drench her for a long time—scrubbing herself vigorously as if trying to wash away the apprehension and anxiety that seemed to follow her at every step.

After the bath feeling a little calmer, Ava changed into a pair of denim shorts and a blue polo neck T-shirt. She decided to read just for fun for a change. She was sick of the scientific journals with all its experiments and theories that she had been mugging throughout the past few months. She just wanted to relax with a book that will soothe her nerves down instead of getting them hyped up.

She found a paperback that she had bought on an impulse from a newspaper stall a few months ago. The reviews behind said that it was a modern day Cinderella story. Ava looked forward to know just how a pumpkin was transformed into a stage coach in the modern day. She came down the stairs carrying the book with her. The music was still blaring; it was one of her favorite songs ‘*out of my mind*’ by Duran Duran. Humming to the tune she went to find something to munch while reading.

While she rummaged through the snack cupboard in the kitchen that contained all kinds of junk foods, which incidentally was hers and Arul's favorite part of the kitchen, she thought she heard a noise—a loud thud to be precise. Ava paused for a moment and slowly turned around apprehensively. But everything looked the same; nothing had been disturbed or fallen down like the noise suggested. She got worried and briskly walked back to the hall. The song that was playing when she returned to the hall was something that always sounded very creepy to her.

She frowned trying to remember whether she had actually heard this song before in the CD that she was playing. As far as she could recall, she was always slightly scared of the song and made it a point not to play any CD that had the song. It was a song called ‘Nightmares’ by a rock group from the 1990's. The singer had a very deep and husky voice. Passionately he was singing ‘*.....even when I close all doors, there's something haunting me; never ending nightmares comes instead of you.*’

Hearing the lyrics Ava felt a sharp shiver scuttle up her spine; she quickly walked towards the music system and switched it off. In a moment her bravery seemed to have been shaken to its core. She felt very shaky and the sudden silence in the house was not

helping her feel any better. She truly couldn't remember that song being there in the CD in the first place. She started frantically looking around for the CD cover everywhere to confirm her suspicion.

Suddenly, she heard a noise in the guest suite and her head jerked up.

*Who is that?* She thought.

She could hear distinct footsteps of someone walking in the patio adjacent to the guest room. She knew that no one was supposed to be there. Since, even if anyone had dropped by, they would surely ring the bell at the main entrance to the hall. She could feel panic rising—rushing through her whole body like a flooding river.

*Wait a minute.* Thought Ava. *I have become such a nervous wreck that I didn't stop to think that it could be a patient who has come to consult Arul. It's possible that they may not know that he was not in town.*

Feeling like a fool at being so paranoid she hurried towards the guest suite.

Looking through the glass doors that led to the patio, Ava tried to reconfirm whether her assumption about a patient was right. Sure enough, there was someone sitting on one of the chairs that she had placed outside. Ava switched on the lights in the patio to get a clearer look at the person. But before she could do so, with a sharp sound all the three bulbs burst all at once.

Ava was so exasperated. *The wiring in this house is completely screwed up.* She thought, remembering the numerous bulbs that had fused time and again at various parts of the house from the time they had moved in.

The patient outside didn't seem to have any reaction at all to the sound of the glass shattering—sitting still, unmoved, in spite of the noise of the shattering bulbs.

Ava opened the patio door and started to walk towards the patient. Huddled inside a blanket, the patient was completely covered and couldn't be seen at all. In fact Ava was not sure whether it was a man or a woman. The patient seemed to be all alone; there was nobody accompanying him or her. Ava found that a bit surprising. Generally all patients came along with someone either from the family, or sometimes even friends. But there he was all alone, wrapped in a blanket. She was worried that probably he was feeling cold due to high fever. Otherwise, it was torturous to be wrapped up completely in the island's humid climate.

"Excuse me," she enquired. "Have you come to see the doctor? He is not in today. *Dia tidak di sini*, you know." She said trying out her broken Malay. He won't be there for the next two days. Why don't you come back in a few days time?"

All the while she was speaking, Ava tried to peep within the blanketed darkness, trying to look for the face. There was no response. It didn't look like she was even heard—leave alone understood. Ava was very concerned.

*How sick is he?* She thought. *I hope he is not unconscious.*

She walked up to him; there was still no reaction. Ava hesitated, her palms were sweaty and she was feeling very nervous. She didn't know what to expect.

*Hope he is alive,* she thought anxiously.

She touched his shoulder wanting to shake him, thinking probably he had fallen asleep and hoping against hope that he was not unconscious or worse still, dead. Her hand recoiled the moment she touched the blanket. It was like touching ice through a blanket.

As she drew her hand back, rubbing the palms together, trying to get rid of the icy feeling that ran through her hand, the figure slowly looked up towards Ava. The horror that in the name of a face looked up at her, made Ava shriek with fear. Never before had she seen anything as ghastly—as ghoulish as what was sitting in that bench in front of her.

In the pale stream of light that trickled out of the guest room sitting area she saw that the face was the color of cigarette ash. The skin around the face had shrunk to show the white color of the skull at its edges. The eyes had melted till they were just sockets filled with a greenish yellow liquid that oozed out and ran down the cheeks. The lips had shrunk back. The jaws had decomposed exposing huge yellow teeth. All Ava could make out was that whatever monster it was, it was in the form of a female. As the face looked up towards her with those empty eyes, she could see maggots crawling out of the nostrils.

All of a sudden she could the music system playing by itself.

*‘Even when I close all doors, there is something haunting me. Never ending nightmares comes instead of you.’* She could hear the lyrics clearly. They seemed to know Ava’s fear, her aversion, and decided to follow her wherever she runs.

Ava’s body practically shut down. But her mind was screaming at her, asking her to get out---to run till the end of the earth and then run beyond it---to get away from the monstrosity before she was consumed by it. But her body refused to oblige; she was totally paralyzed. She felt like a rock—a rock with all human emotions intact, but stuck to one place on the ground.

The ghostly figure got up. She stared at Ava and broke out into a smile so menacing that even the air around her seemed to turn cold. The chill in the air made Ava shiver involuntarily, and that’s when she got her body back to obey her mind.

Ava ran like never before, she ran like a tsunami was following her, a tsunami that wanted to engulf her till she ceased to exist. She rushed through the patio door and ran towards the hall. She was a nervous wreck by then and had no idea what she wanted to do or where she wanted to go. All she knew was that she had to get out of the house. Reaching the hall, Ava could suddenly feel a sharp pain in her chest that shot down her left arm and through her spine. She lost her balance and tripped on the coffee table and fell down with a thud. Ava could feel her knee wet, as blood oozed out of it, hurt by the corner of the coffee table.

*Is this it? Am I going to die like this?* She thought—almost giving up. But her body, her mind had other plans. *GET UP!! HURRY! RUN.* Urged a tiny voice in her head. We can’t give up. Perhaps it was her survival instinct, perhaps it was even her fear of never seeing Arul again, that kicked her into action. Ava scrambled up from her fall.

Turning around and looking towards the patio door, a sliver of which could be still seen from the hall, she saw the ghoulish figure was now outside hanging upside down from the patio door frame. Her long wavy and filthy hair was hanging around her upside down face and her scraggy hand was extended towards Ava as if she trying to reach out for her. Part of the face was flattened against the glass of the patio door giving her a more distorted look. Ava didn’t wait to see anything more. She got up, grabbed the keys to the jeep that was parked outside and got out of the house.

As she ran out of the front door her eyes fell on the fountains on both sides of the stairs that led to the car porch in front of her. Bright red blood pouring from the statues of the women on top and ran down the entire fountain creating a river of blood. The blood flowed freely on the driveway turning the entire path scarlet. Suddenly both the blood covered statues of the women turned their heads toward Ava and smiled while blood gushed out of their perfectly carved-in-marble teeth. There was such malice and chill in their smile that they simultaneously appeared human and alive, and inhuman and dead.

Ava ran as fast as her legs could carry her, for the first time cursing the long driveway. She kept on running towards the jeep but somehow, the path seemed to go on and on. She could hear a harsh cackle of laughter overlapping the creepy music that was still playing. Finally with a last desperate scream she got inside the jeep and started it with a speed that only a person who is followed by certain death can do.

Driving away into the night, away from the house, she glanced at the rearview mirror and saw the statues still watching her with a malicious smirk stuck on their faces. As she moved farther away from the house, the lyrics to the song started to fade gradually although the next part of the song was still playing in her mind against all her wishes, all her will.

*'Lost in a part of my self which I can't find anymore..... I wonder whether it will end tonight...'*

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 9

The gradual feeling of warmth and the morning sounds of birds chirping woke Ava from an exceedingly uncomfortable and disturbed sleep. Groggy and disoriented she looked around trying to focus on her surroundings. Her hands felt completely numb and almost every joint in her body ached as though she had just fought ten rounds with the world's heavy weight boxing champion. Her mind tried to wake up, pushing aside the thick blanket of sleep but having spent the entire night sleeping in the jeep, her body protested against her mind's commands.

The previous night she had driven to town at the speed of lightening—taking every curve in the narrow winding road through the hills at full speed. Thankfully she did not encounter any traffic on the road—the jeep being the only vehicle till she reached town. Seeing the shops and the lit up streets of the market area, Ava relaxed and slowed down. She parked the jeep near a petrol station that was open all night—the signs of human habitation around town giving her a glimpse of hope, a chance of survival against the ordeal that she had been through.

Fear had conquered her completely; shivering uncontrollably at the thought of what she had gone through in the house Ava realized ironically that what terrified her now, was something that until a few days ago she never would have never believed, existed. But now, every time she closed her eyes, all she could see was the ghastly vision of that thing—that monstrosity that had taken over her house, her peace and almost her marriage.

Ava was frightened, and horrified of being frightened of something intangible. She was so used to handling things that could be charted down in a journal. Theory, Experiment and Inference; those were the three words that explained her whole world and she didn't know how to handle something that didn't fall within the realms of a scientific explanation.

It almost took her till the wee hours of the morning to shake off the fear; she was so lost. It was a new country, a new problem and she didn't know anyone. She felt like she was drowning in a sea of hopelessness. She didn't want to go back to the house—at least not by herself.

She tried to move her tired body, tried to wake up to the sounds of the morning but she was so exhausted. And soon without realizing it she dozed off again in spite of her body protesting against the very uncomfortable position she had adapted to sleep—her head resting on her hands on the steering wheel and her feet curled up on the seat.

It was Faizal who found her like that around 6.45am in the morning. Chatting with all the familiar faces on his way to the local grocery store, he noticed the jeep parked near the petrol station. He was surprised because it was unlikely that Ava had ventured to drive to town so early in the morning. Cutting his conversation short with a friend that he had bumped into, Faizal rushed to the jeep and found Ava on the driver's seat. Seeing Ava's motionless body there, his mind for a moment thought of the worst thing possible. But then after looking closely and observing her breathing softly, he felt silly for letting

his imagination run wild like that. However, in spite of finding her alive and well, Faizal couldn't shrug off his worry—especially seeing her asleep like that.

"Madam, please wake up." He called out to Ava anxiously—not knowing why and exactly how long she had been sleeping there.

It took several attempts but he was finally able to wake her up.

Ava sat up groggily, she didn't realize when she had again gone back to sleep. Perhaps the trauma of the previous night was acting as the sedative since her mind was incapable of handling so much shock. When her eyes focused on Faizal's concerned face, she broke down crying—tears flowing unbridled from her eyes. The fear of the night before, the fact that she had been all alone and had no one to share her ordeal with had numbed her; but seeing Faizal melted all her resolve. She started sobbing bitterly—her breathing erratic as fresh bouts of anxious tears flowed down her cheeks.

She was ashamed of behaving like a young child, but didn't know how to control herself. She had never been in a situation like this before, nor had she ever known what it was to feel vulnerable.

Faizal was completely dumbfounded; being completely unaware of what was causing her to cry so badly. Neither did he know how to console a woman who was crying her heart out—at least not without prior knowledge of what exactly was ailing her.

He was worried whether knowing she was alone in the house, there had been some form of burglary and Ava had been caught in the way and probably was lucky enough to escape from their clutches at the last moment.

*But then, why didn't she go to the police?* Wondered Faizal.

"There, there, it's ok now. I am here." Faizal stammered trying to calm Ava down.

He was aware that they were in the middle of the town with a lot of faces known to both Ava and him strolling around, although granted that being early morning there weren't many people on the road.

Faizal being a person always filled with a zest for life and humor was hardly ever put into such situations. He was bewildered and didn't know how to console Ava. Should he pat her? Hold her hand? After all she was the boss's wife and he wasn't sure whether any of those gestures of endearment was appropriate. Unable to make up his mind, he just stood speechlessly on her side of the jeep not knowing what else to do.

After sometime, having cried her heart out, Ava calmed down. Her tears stopped, though her face was all puffed up; her blocked nose making it very hard for her to breathe without making sniffling noises.

She looked up and smiled bleakly at Faizal through her tear stricken eyes. Faizal's heart went out to her; at that point of time he forgot their professional relationship. There was a lonely woman, all alone in a strange place going through some serious trouble.

He smiled back at her. "Madam," he said gently, "why don't we go sit somewhere, and then you can tell me everything. Perhaps I can help." he added trying very hard to sound confident, not knowing exactly how he may have to help Ava.

Ava nodded in agreement. She really needed to tell someone of her torment. She didn't care if it sounded ridiculous to anyone else—she just *had* to get it off her chest.

"Why don't you move over and let me drive?" Faizal suggested soothingly.

Sleeping in the jeep had numbed her buttocks and legs so much that Ava could hardly feel them and it took quite an effort for her to move over to the passenger side.

Faizal drove to a local restaurant down the road. It was a tiny wooden shack; a few plastic chairs and foldable tables were laid out for the diners both inside and outside the restaurant. The place sold a variety of local delicacies including Noraini's '*Nasi Lemak*' for breakfast. Faizal gently guided Ava to a table laid outside the restaurant.

Ava was too wound up to eat, but on Faizal's insistence she ordered toast and a '*teh tarik*'—a Malaysian version of tea with milk, served in a mini-sized beer mug instead of a cup and a saucer.

Between sips and bites of her drink and food, Ava narrated the whole incident in bits and pieces. Her mind was still not working well enough to be able to narrate it in the correct sequence. She told him everything—the feeling of uneasiness in the house, the footsteps, things going missing and the shadows she thought she could see lurking just beyond her area of vision. Finally as the grand finale, she told him the entire incidents of the previous night.

While relating the incident even in the bright daylight with the bustling of a busy street around her, Ava could still feel the fear and her throat almost closed up choking her words. With a gulp, she tried to stop the tears that were flowing freely again—running down her cheeks in tiny rivulets. She bent her head down trying to compose herself. Blowing her nose in the tissue, she looked up to see Faizal's face.

He was watching her intently; filled with amazement since he always thought of Ava as somebody quite shy and timid. He couldn't imagine that she had gone through such horrors and till then had no one else to share her fears with.

However, Ava mistook his silence and suddenly felt very foolish. She could imagine what must be running through Faizal's mind.

*He must be thinking that I am truly crazy if I believe in ghosts and spirits in this day and age,* thought Ava dismayed.

"Look Faizal ...." began Ava hesitatingly. "I know that it's really difficult to believe me. In fact..."

"I do believe you." interrupted Faizal in a low voice before Ava could complete her sentence.

For the first time in the few weeks that Ava had known him, she saw Faizal looking grim.

She was surprised; she looked back at his face to convince herself that he was not joking, but he stared back at her with a very seriously.

"Madam," Faizal continued. "We are not that educated, hence we do not claim to know each and every phenomenon that takes place on earth. We do believe that there are a lot of things that cannot be explained through any science. It is God's earth, where I am sure there are other entities present—living among us. So yes I do believe you. I believe the torment that you must have gone through."

Ava was very relieved to hear those words. Somehow at the back of her mind she was always afraid that she was going mad and was probably hallucinating. For a long time she had waited for the ridicule, the disbelief that she would have to face when she did talk about her ordeal. But now she understood that no longer did her logical and scientific mind need to deny any argument about the existence of the supernatural and she could finally acknowledge that whatever was happening was real.

Her eyes filled up with tears once again. “Thank you.” she whispered, reaching out and squeezing his hands. “I felt so lost. I really didn’t know what to do.”

After a pause with a new resolve she added, “I don’t want to go back to the house.”

Faizal gave Ava an encouraging smile. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We will get rid of whatever is haunting the house. In fact we know just the right person who can help you.” “You should have told Noraini everything. She is very good at handling these types of problems.” he informed Ava.

“Noraini?” asked a confused Ava. “But she has not come to the house for more than a week now. She had sent a note saying that she was seriously ill. In fact,” continued Ava, “she came to clean the house only once.”

Faizal was really baffled. He raised his eyebrows in a frown trying to think what was wrong with the scenario. Just the other day he had met Noraini and she didn’t mention anything about her not working for Ava. As a matter of fact he had asked her about her new job and she had answered saying that everything was fine and moreover she hadn’t looked sick.

Faizal realized that there was more to it than met the eye. He told Ava that he would take Ava to Noraini’s house and they can then find out what exactly had happened to her for her to leave the job.

“Don’t worry Madam,” said Faizal. “We will definitely get to the bottom of this. But first, why don’t we go back to the house, and check to see that everything is locked up and secure? Did you lock the house when you rushed out yesterday?”

“I am not sure.” said Ava frowning, trying to remember.

She didn’t *want* to go back, but knew that eventually she would have to. She had rushed out the previous night and it was rather absurd and completely impossible not to go back there sometime. Moreover, she felt a lot safer knowing that she was not going to be alone and that Faizal was going to accompany her.

Ava started feeling very nervous as they approached the front gate of the house. In the daylight she saw that she had hit the left side of the gate the previous night and it was bent quite badly. However apart from that physical manifestation of the effect of her fear, the house looked completely ordinary.

Reaching the main entrance to the hall they saw that the front door was closed, but when Faizal turned the handle, the door opened easily confirming his fear that Ava had not locked the house when she left the previous night.

He asked Ava to wait outside and went inside to check the house—leaving Ava standing alone on the verandah.

Filled with a reluctant curiosity Ava turned around, looking towards the fountains on both sides of the stairs. They looked completely normal. The statues of the women on top looked as bland and expressionless as only lifeless statues can look. There was no hint of any life or smile on their faces--malicious, or otherwise. There was no blood flowing through them. Plain water sparkling under the morning sun made a merry gurgling sound as it flowed through the different levels of the fountains.

Turning back towards the door she saw Faizal walking towards her with a relieved smile.

“Everything looks okay Madam.” he said. “Now if you want we can go and meet Noraini and ask her how we can get rid of this situation.”

“Could you give me a few minutes?” requested Ava. “I just want to have a quick shower and change into something else. I have been in this pair of shorts from yesterday.” She said smiling apologetically.

With a nod, Faizal raised his hand gesturing Ava to go right in and followed her inside the house. Ava walked inside hesitantly, still nervous about what may be lurking in the corners that Faizal may have overlooked. However she found everything to be in their right place with no sign of supernatural interference at any part of the house. The only thing that remained a clue to the previous night’s terror was the upturned coffee table where she had tripped and fell.

There was another thing that Ava knew she needed to do before she went upstairs and had her shower. She walked up to the cabinet on top of which was placed the CD player. After switching on the player she scanned through the songs one by one, wanting to know more than anything whether the song ‘Never ending nightmare’ was actually there in the CD. But as she had feared, it was not there—in fact she was sure she didn’t have any CD containing the song. She turned off the player and went upstairs for her shower wondering what connection the haunting had to that eerie song.

After a shower, she changed into a pair of jeans and a white shirt. Feeling much better she hurried down the stairs ready to confront anything that was invading the peace and privacy of her home.

Noraini was sweeping the entrance to her house when she heard the sound of the jeep. Although she didn’t look ill, she did look very pale. The color drained farther from her face when she saw Faizal and Ava get down from the jeep.

“Ma’am, you? I...” Noraini started to stammer not knowing what to tell Ava.

She had not expected to see Ava at her home and now she felt very ashamed of the excuse she had made and left the job.

“Good morning Noraini,” said Ava smiling hesitatingly. “Don’t worry, I am not here to ask you to come back to work for me. I am just here to find out the real reason why you left it in the first place,” she added softly.

Noraini stared at her and then at Faizal’s face. She was not sure what was happening.

“*Boleh kita masuk?*” (May we enter?) Faizal asked Noraini, smiling at her reassuringly sensing the awkwardness in both the ladies.

“Oh *boleh, boleh*”. (Oh! Yes) Noraini answered ashamed to have forgotten her manners in front of her guests.

She quickly put out two chairs for Ava and Faizal and grabbed a third one for herself.

“Ma’am I bring drink for you?” she asked Ava in her broken English.

“No, No. Please don’t take the trouble. We are fine. We just want to talk to you, about something,” answered Ava slowly, hesitantly.

Noraini sat down intrigued.

Little by little Ava narrated the entire incident of the previous night. The parts that Noraini couldn’t understand, Faizal explained to her in Malay. Ava also told her about the general feeling she had in the house—about being followed, the sounds, the footsteps, and the feeling of uneasiness.

“I just wanted to know whether the reason you stopped coming had anything to do with what I felt.” She asked Noraini gently, looking directly into her eyes.

Noraini looked down. She couldn't believe that Ava had gone through such a terrifying experience the night before. She was mortified and felt terrible thinking that she had not warned them about the entity in the house before she left.

*It's my fault; I should have let them know about the evil that had been residing in the house. Whether they believed it or not, it was still my duty to warn them.* Thought Noraini miserably.

She looked at Ava and Faizal and found them both staring at her—waiting anxiously for her to explain to them about the strange things that were happening at the house.

She knew that she had not done the right thing by keeping quiet, so taking a deep breath she started to speak. In a low and hushed tone, she related her part of the story. She told them what she had felt in the laundry room, how she had mistakenly angered the spirit, and how she actually had a visit from it while trying to make herself some protection so that she could return back to her job the next day.

“It is a very strong spirit.” she emphasized. “One who is bent on getting some sort of revenge from you and your husband. I say it is a very strong spirit because no ordinary spirit would be able to sit in the middle of the circle of protection that I had created.”

“But why? Ava asked. “What have we done to it? I don't even know who it is.” She said in a shaky voice that was almost on the verge of hysteria. “What are we going to do now? Is it going to kill us?” With every question Ava could feel the panic rising in her.

Noraini quickly walked up to Ava and put her hands on her shoulder. She could feel Ava shivering and felt genuinely sorry for her.

“Don't worry ma'am. We will work something out. I will not let you or Doctor come to any harm. I am so sorry that I leave you like that last time,” said Noraini almost in tears herself.

While Faizal and Ava listened intently, Noraini solemnly described exactly what had to be done in order to get rid of the spirit and the haunting.

“First we must find out more about the entity.” she said. “Only then we will know how to deal with her.”

“Do you have any idea why the spirit is after you and your husband?” She asked looking at Ava.

Ava shook her head. She was utterly confused; she could not imagine what she must have done to bear the wrath of any person—dead or alive.

“In fact,” said Ava ruefully, “I still can't believe that I am here trying to find out about a ghost and why it hates me, when till yesterday I didn't even know they existed.”

Noraini nodded her head sympathetically. She could understand how Ava must feel to have her whole belief system shaken in a matter of a day.

“Well in that case, I think of something.” suggested Noraini in her broken English meaning that she had a theory.

“Since you are feeling all these scary things in this house,” she said, “and you and boss have never felt before, I have got feeling that the spirit is close to the house. It must have been there before you even come in.”

Faizal who was listening to Noraini intently all this while, suddenly jumped up. “Yes, you are right,” he agreed excitedly. “We believe that if a house is left empty for a long time then sometimes things from the other world take shelter there.” he explained to Ava.

“But then,” said Ava, “why does it bear such a grudge towards me and my husband? I mean we have never disturbed it. We didn’t even believe in such things. Then why is it threatening to kill us?”

Each of them were lost in deep thought. Something was not right. They couldn’t be certain of the identity of the entity, and thus could not understand how to address the problem.

While all of them were pondering over the matter, Ava suddenly remembered something.

She sat up, her face brightened. “I think I may know the identity of the spirit.”

The others looked at her expectantly.

“Faizal,” said Ava turning towards him, “didn’t you say that the previous owners sold off the house to the timber company after the wife met with an accident?” Faizal nodded his head.

“She died in the accident too didn’t she?”

“Yes that’s true.” Faizal nodded agreeing with Ava although he was not sure what the connection that Ava was trying to make was.

“So, it can be the spirit of the wife.” said Ava, now excited that they may have identified the source of the problem. Moreover, she may be angry with us that we are living comfortably in a home that she had built for herself.” she added animatedly.

Ava looked at Noraini with bated breath, hoping against hope that this was the answer they were searching for. Noraini looked like she was thinking something.

Finally she agreed with Ava. “It really seems to be the spirit of the wife” said Noraini thoughtfully. “Everything adds up. Perhaps she wants you two to leave her house and that is why she is frightening you so much.” she added.

It was as if all of them got more energized after they discovered the source of the ghostly haunting. They started discussing eagerly about what had to be done. Noraini informed them that they would have to exorcise the spirit, make her cross over to the other side and for that she needed something that belonged to her.

Ava was not sure whether there was anything belonging to the late wife of the ex-owner in the house. However she knew that she had to try and find it to complete the exorcism ritual before Arul comes back the next day. He would undoubtedly throw a fit if he knew what they were up to and most certainly Faizal and Noraini would get into serious trouble with him.

So without wasting anymore time she stood up to get back to the jeep. Faizal accompanied her to the house while Noraini got busy to gather the things that she would need for the exorcism. Ava left her mobile phone with Noraini in case they had any enquiries and needed her advice.

Noraini felt a lot better. She knew that once the spirit’s identity was known, it would be easier to face it. She felt like a woman on a secret mission.

At the house, Ava was really lost. She didn’t know where she could find something that belonged to the deceased.

“Why don’t we look in the storeroom?” suggested Faizal. “I am sure there would be at least something that the previous owners would have left and gone.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.” said Ava with a smile, relieved since Faizal had lessened her worry.

They searched the storeroom from one end to the other but initially could not find anything that could help them with the exorcism. Then Faizal suggested that they remove all the boxes and search through the storeroom again---just to be sure. It was a tedious task but sure enough, after the boxes were removed, in a dark corner of the store room they found a pile of books and magazines left behind by the previous owner and within that pile there were a few old photo albums.

They brought the albums out to the verandah. Flipping through it, Faizal pointed out to the photo of a woman in her mid thirties. She was dressed in a yellow summer dress with tiny white flowers printed on it. She was holding a huge beach hat in her hand and smiling at the camera.

“She is the one.” said Faizal. “She was the wife of the previous owner who died here in an accident.”

Ava took the album from Faizal and stared at the photo closely. She saw a very beautiful woman with a smile that reached her eyes, staring back at her through the picture. She couldn’t imagine that this was the same person that was now haunting her.

How death changes everything. She thought. Not only does it leave behind grieving loved ones, it also changes the character of the person who dies.

Noraini was very pleased when Ava called her up and told her about the photograph. She knew that the best item to use during an exorcism is an actual photograph of the late person. The ritual in that case was far more effective. By that time it was already late in the afternoon so Ava quickly stuffed the photo into her handbag, locked up the house and left for Noraini’s place along with Faizal.

On the way Ava realized that she was famished and was sure that Faizal would be hungry too, though he did not say anything. She asked Faizal to stop somewhere in order to grab a quick bite before arriving at Noraini’s place. They stopped at a small restaurant, and ordered lunch. After a meal of ‘*Nasi Lemak*’ and ‘*Ayam Rendang*’, they headed towards Noraini’s house.

By evening, everything was prepared for the exorcism ritual. Noraini had cleared all her furniture from the hall and sent her children off to a neighbor’s place. The locals believed that children are most vulnerable to possession by spirits; moreover during an exorcism, if the spirit is very strong, they have the ability to harm the people around. Thus according to the local culture, during an exorcism or a séance, children, pregnant women, women having their menstrual cycle as well as people having any kind of mental depression are advised not to be around.

The sky was completely dark—there was a storm approaching in from the sea. The streets were empty and people who could, had gone back home to avoid the coming storm. Everywhere there was a silence.

Noraini had made a circle of salt in her living room. She surrounded the circle with thick candles. Candles were also lit around the rest of the tiny house. All around the room in small clay pots she had put burning ‘*kemayan*’. The room was filled with its strong smell and smoke. She planned to evoke the spirit talk to her, and then help her crossover to the other side.

It sounded easy, but only Noraini knew how dangerous it was. She had already faced the entity once and she knew its strength and the wrath it carried towards Ava and Arul. She was worried for Ava particularly. She hoped that the others could not see the underlying nervousness that she was trying very hard to cover and appear confident. She looked at Faizal and Ava and slowly explained how she wanted to evoke the spirit and help her crossover.

Faizal was feeling very uneasy. He had heard of exorcisms and séances, but this was the first time he was actually taking part in one actively. He glanced at Ava and saw that her face had turned completely white—her eyes laden with fear and reluctance to be a part of this unknown ritual. Feeling sorry for this foreign lady who had put her life and her faith into his and Noraini's hands, Faizal promised himself that no matter what he would try his best to protect her from any danger.

“Remember,” Noraini emphasized. “No matter what happens, do not leave the circle of salt. It is the only thing that will keep us safe from the entity.” Saying that, she joined Ava and Faizal inside the circle.

Noraini carried with her a book of incantations that was used to evoke spirits, a small vial of holy water and the picture of the deceased that Ava and Faizal had gotten from the house.

All the three of them held hands and Noraini slowly started chanting verses from the book. Gradually her voice started getting louder and louder—calling out to the spirit, asking her to appear in front of her; commanding her to leave the house.

All of a sudden, the windows in the room started rattling violently. Ava jumped up and clutched Faizal's arm. Faizal winced in pain as her nails dug into his forearms. Outside, they could hear the wind pick up speed. Sighing and moaning as it blew in through the narrow slits of the closed windows. Ava started to get very frightened; she held on to Faizal's hand tightly squeezing her eyes shut.

The air inside the room felt very different. It was as chilly as the air in the mountains. There was a fierce gale blowing outside that sounded like the mournful laments of infernal demons. All at once with a gush of strong wind one of the windows opened. An icy cold breeze came in blowing off almost all the candles. The lack of light created mystical shadows everywhere in the room.

Ava slowly opened her eyes. In the flickering light of the remaining candles she could see the figure of a woman although the smoke from the burning *'kemayan'* impeded her vision. The figure appeared blurry, as if it was also flickering like a candle.

Noraini addressed the figure. In a very firm voice she told the spirit that she was already dead and that there was nothing that should bind her to this world and she should move on to the next world.

“Leave the house! Leave all of us alone.” she commanded. “There is nothing remaining for you here, crossover; don't be afraid. You will find peace and solace there.”

The figure started gliding around them slowly, making gurgling noises as though she was trying to say something, but no one could make out the words. Moreover, the fear of actually having the spirit manifest herself in front of them made them more or less unable physically, to even be able to understand its words. All they knew, all they *wanted* was her to leave them alone.

Noraini took the photo and lighted it from one of the candles around the circle that luckily was still burning. As the photograph caught fire, all the three of them could see the apparition fading. However, suddenly even in her state of semi disappearance, the apparition stared at Ava unblinkingly with a look that Ava felt was anger; anger at being banished from her own home by strangers, anger at the fact that due to the ritual, she would have to leave the house and anger at Ava herself for being the reason behind her banishment. For a moment Ava's blood froze, but slowly as the figure started to disappear, she could feel her regular heart beat returning gradually.

At the final moment, just before the figure disappeared completely, there was a bright light—an almost blinding light that appeared in the room. The spirit had a look of heart wrenching sadness on her face. She gazed at all the three faces and slowly walked towards the light finally dissimilating into it. The light disappeared and the open window closed by itself with a bang.

There was a dead silence in the room after that; the wind outside had also slowed down. The atmosphere inside the room felt much lighter—as if a great shadow had been lifted off.

“It's gone.” whispered Noraini smiling at Ava. “It will not disturb you anymore.”

Ava was still having trouble believing what she saw. She squeezed Noraini's hand, while her eyes filled up with tears. She was so thankful to her, to both of them in fact. She knew she would be eternally indebted to these people. The ones, who in spite of hardly knowing her had not hesitated to put their own lives at risk to save hers.

“Thank you so much. Words can hardly explain how grateful I am.” said Ava tearfully. “I will never forget your kindness.”

Noraini smiled and patted her hand. “Don't worry, everything will be alright now. You don't have to thank me, thank the Almighty. It is He who protected you.”

Faizal took Ava back to the house. Ava's heart was still beating erratically; she was still not convinced that everything was alright, her eyes portrayed the fear she felt within. She was still slightly apprehensive of spending the night alone in the house—especially after what she went through the previous night.

Faizal looking at her face could almost see her thoughts. He felt pity for Ava.

“Ma'am is it okay if I spend the night here?” he asked. “Since boss is not here, I feel particularly responsible to look after you. So if you don't have any problem, I can sleep downstairs.”

Faizal tried to say it in a way that didn't make Ava feel embarrassed of her fear—after all she was the boss's wife.

Ava was extremely relieved; she smiled at Faizal and agreed to his plan immediately. After getting him some sheets and blankets and making sure he is comfortable in the couch downstairs, Ava retired for the night.

*The house feels so different*, thought Ava. After a long time she actually felt safe inside its walls.

Ava went to sleep wondering how she was going to explain everything that had happened at the house to Arul in his absence. Her beliefs had taken a complete 180° turn. She hoped that Arul would be understanding and not ridicule her. That night for the first time in a long time, Ava slept like a baby.

## Chapter 10

The next morning the golden rays of the sun streaming in through the glass panels woke Ava up. From the bed she could see the endless blue of the ocean and the white waves dancing in joy welcoming the bright morning sun.

Ava stayed in bed for longer than usual, staring out at the ocean, trying to embrace the peace and serenity of the view. Her thoughts turned towards the happenings of the last couple of days and she shuddered, thinking of the horrors that actually existed on earth. She was glad that it was all over. Although in the broad daylight with everything real—everything tangible, it was still difficult for her to believe that the previous days' occurrences were anything more than a very strange and vivid nightmare.

She got up, stretched lazily and headed for the bathroom. Pouring a generous amount of bath salts in the tub she filled it up with warm water. She sat in the tub languidly soaking in the warmth of the water, the beautiful fragrance of the perfumed salts and the tranquil view through the long picture windows. Half way through her bath, she remembered that Faizal had stayed over the previous night.

*Oh my God! I totally forgot about him.* Thought Ava guiltily.

She dried herself quickly and changed into her jeans as fast as she could but even then, by the time she rushed downstairs, it was almost ten thirty in the morning.

There was no sign of Faizal downstairs. She found a note in the kitchen saying, "*Good morning Ma'am! I know you must be very tired and I didn't want to disturb you, I am headed for the site now. In case you need anything, please call the site office. I will be there the whole day.*" As a PS, he had added, "*Don't worry, nothing is going to disturb you anymore.*"

Ava smiled at the note. She was very touched at his loyalty, his sincerity and was thankful that there had been someone she could lean on through the trying times.

Planning ahead of what she wanted to do the whole day Ava realized that she was ravenous, seeing how she had hardly eaten anything in the past two days. She walked briskly to the kitchen to make herself some breakfast. After making a batch of vanilla pancakes she doused it heavily with maple syrup and gobbled it up hungrily. After all, she deserved a celebratory breakfast, she argued with herself.

Since Ava was not in the mood for doing any work—especially anything to do with her thesis, she decided to just take it easy for the day. Even after having a good sleep the previous night and a long bath she still felt very exhausted ; her eyes were burning slightly and her body ache made her feel as if she had been on a ten-mile hike through the mountains. The last two days had drained her out of all her energy.

She couldn't wait for Arul to get back--he was due to arrive that evening. Ava really missed him. For the first time she understood what it felt like to go through trying times without him beside her. She was always sheltered by him in everyway and the ordeals of the past two days made her appreciate him more. She wished she could actually relate to him the nerve shattering experiences she had been through in his absence.

*What would he say to it?* Ava wondered. She decided to narrate to him the whole incident someday, depending on his mood.

After a very satisfying breakfast, she carried a mat and a paperback novel to the beach, found a quiet and shady place beneath a cedar tree and settled down for an idle afternoon. The warm afternoon sun and the pine scented breeze worked in symphony to put Ava to sleep. She awoke to find that the golden sun had turned orange and was getting ready to set into the ocean bed. She quickly clambered up, gathered her things and headed for the house.

Ava decided to make a nice romantic dinner for Arul as a truce, a token of being sorry for her behavior over the past few days. She would put candles all around the house, create a dreamy ambience and make his favorite dish. Arul loved chicken *tandoori* and would have had it for three meals a day if he could. Ava planned to make it to surprise him and smiled, knowing that he would definitely not be expecting this reception.

Climbing up the flight of steps towards the main door, Ava had a sudden ominous feeling; for just a moment. She halted trying to get rid of the nervous pit in her stomach while looking over her shoulders, as a cloud of gloom descended on her mind for a split second. As suddenly as the feeling came, it disappeared and the next moment, Ava recovered, shrugging her shoulders and mentally admonishing herself for getting paranoid. She knew that the haunting was over and she had nothing to worry about.

“It’s just nerves; stop it!” she firmly told herself out aloud.

Once she saw entered the house, she saw the clock in the hall showed 6.30. She realized that Arul would probably be home in another hour. She quickly defrosted the chicken in the microwave and marinated it with the required spices. Then she went around lighting scented candles all around the house while dimming all the other lights. Having set the mood, she switched on a jazz CD (Arul’s favorite) and went up to take a quick shower.

After the shower she selected a black lace negligee with a matching pair of black panties and bra. Ava smiled to herself imagining the look on Arul’s face when he sees her. He was not very used to Ava setting out to seduce him, it mostly happened the other way. After glancing at the time she hurriedly applied some light makeup on her face, darkened her eyes with a hint of kohl and blow dried her long hair. She finished up by spraying a spritz of J’adore, on her pulse points.

Downstairs in the kitchen she switched on the cooker hood lights and started preparing dinner. She didn’t want to use the bright lights and spoil the mood knowing that Arul maybe back any moment—anyway, the small halogen lights were bright enough for her to see what she was doing. The rest of the kitchen was just illuminated with a soft yellow glow.

Ava started cutting up vegetables to make a quick salad as she waited for the chicken to get well marinated. While chopping up the vegetables, she suddenly felt the hair on the back of her neck rise, a familiar feeling that generally happened when someone stood behind and watched her. For a split second she panicked, the fear almost engulfing her, but then she realized that it must be Arul, observing her—probably surprised at her attire. With a seductive smile on her face, she turned around to greet Arul and instead screamed louder than a factory siren when she came face to face with the most horrific vision.

It was crouching on the small breakfast table in the kitchen. The eyes were white except for tiny dots that represented the pupils. The grayish white skin in the dim glow of the light looked as if it was melting from almost every visible part of the body. The apparition was in a complete state of decomposition—something white and pus-like was oozing out, which Ava, even in that shocked state realized, were maggots.

Ava froze. This time she knew that her end was approaching. She realized with dismay, that whatever it was that had been haunting her, whatever it was that had been disrupting the very peace of her life was STILL THERE!

All the rituals, all the exorcisms, nothing had worked. She was going to die in the hands of something that she had not believed existed even a week back. Slowly the figure started crawling on all four towards Ava. Once it had reached the end of the small breakfast table, it halted for a moment, and then continued crawling at the same pace on thin air as if on an invisible plane. An act so simple was perhaps more frightening than the figure itself. It was as if nothing in the world could deter its movements on its way towards Ava.

Though her first instinct was to run, Ava stood transfixed at the same place not able to move, speak or even breathe. Her heart was throbbing painfully in her ribcage and she could feel her legs almost betraying her, wanting to buckle under her. Her throat felt so dry that it closed up causing her to choke.

When the figure reached just a couple of feet from Ava, Arul burst through the kitchen door at the speed of a hurricane. He had heard Ava's screams as he reached the car porch. Glancing at him, Ava realized that even he had seen the figure. But strangely, even at that moment of fear she noticed that his face portrayed a look of recognition and shock, rather than simply horror.

Instantly he spirit turned around, facing Arul. The look on its decaying face was so hateful, so angry, that the look itself had the ability to turn anyone to ashes. Glaring at Arul it raised its hands that ended in sharp claws, as if wanting to pull out chunks of flesh from all over Arul's body. Its fang-like teeth were bared in an angry scowl. Ava was certain that they would not be able to leave the house alive. However knowing that it was not only her life that was in jeopardy, but that the entity was also going to kill Arul, made her jolt back to action.

"Arul, run." she screamed. Though her voice sounded more like a whisper rather than a shout. "Don't stop; just run towards the door." she said while forcing her legs to obey her mind and to run towards the door.

But her legs were too wobbly and that slowed her movements down. Arul seeing Ava in that state understood that the shock had been too much for her. He feared that she may faint of shock right then and there. He rushed and grabbed Ava lifting her in his arms and carried her out of the house and into the jeep as fast as he could.

Trying to start the jeep as quickly as possible, Arul happened to glance at the rear-view mirror. He could see the specter crawling out of the front door laughing eerily---a disturbing sound that seemed to echo throughout the whole area. With a grim determination, Arul put the jeep into gear and roared out of the house as fast as he could. He drove towards town at an express speed, at the same time grabbing a bottle of water from the backseat for Ava.

After escaping the vicinity of the house after several minutes, Arul slowed down and finding a broader space in the narrow winding road he parked the jeep at one side.

"Are you okay?" he asked Ava anxiously.

Ava nodded her head, still terrified and not trusting her voice enough to speak.

They were both equally stunned. After a few minutes that felt like a few centuries to both of them, Ava started speaking. In the silence of the night with only the noise of the idle engine running in the background she told Arul everything—everything inclusive of the rituals in Noraini's house. For once, Ava was not bothered of what he was going to think of her; she was not bothered about the ridicule. She knew that for those few minutes even Arul went through the same fear as her when he faced with the same apparition.

Arul didn't interrupt her. He listened attentively throughout Ava's narration—only his face changing its expressions from fear to amazement to disbelief. When Ava finally stopped speaking, he sat there quietly looking out towards the road---a contemplative look on his face.

He realized that it was time to share his nightmares with Ava. Both of them have suffered alone for a long time. He knew it was his turn to recount his feelings of fear, his sleepless nights and his lucid nightmares.

However something deep inside his heart stopped him from revealing the whole truth; the truth about the apparition *or* the fact that he could recognize its origin. Perhaps it was male ego or perhaps it was just his way of denying the existence of supernatural.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Ava in a small voice. "I know we have tried to stop it. But it seems to be getting stronger and stronger."

"I know," said Arul in a low voice. "But we can't give up. We have to do something. I am not going to let some non existent piece of past harm our present and future." he added grimly.

Ava was puzzled by Arul's comment. *What did he mean by past?* She wondered. *How did he know that the spirit was of the late wife of the last owner? Did Faizal tell him, or did I tell him while telling him about the exorcism?* Somehow, Ava couldn't recall telling him the identity of the spirit that they had assumed to be

"Let's go and see Noraini, perhaps she can still help us." said Arul hopefully.

Ava was not sure how much more Noraini could help them. But at that moment that was the only choice they had. Arul steered the jeep back on the road, and started driving—faster now, wanting to reach their destination as soon as possible.

While steering around a hairpin bend on the road, Arul felt something grabbing his leg from below. He tried to detangle his leg; at the same time trying to look down and see what it was that was stuck to his leg. In the silvery moonlight that was peeping through the trees and the clouds, he could barely make out the shadow of a hunched figure sitting close his feet and grabbing his leg with an iron grip. Its cold bony fingers held on to his right leg till he started to lose his blood circulation to the foot. He could feel his foot growing colder and numb.

The knotted hair around the face was blowing like a huge tarantula's legs in the wind. The figure had huddled itself so close to him that Arul felt repulsed by his own body. He tried to lean away, at the same time trying with all his strength to free his leg from the deadly grip. Even in his state of panic he attempted to apply the brakes, but in vain. The figure looked up at him. And with a menacing smirk she held his foot down firmly on the accelerator. He could see the needle of the speedometer climbing; 80,100, 120, 140 Km/hour on the winding hilly road.

Ava was screaming in the background, "Arul Aruuuuul!!!"

But Arul was speechless. He was putting all his energy into trying to save their lives. He tried to stop the speeding jeep by hitting it on the dividers in the middle of the road. But at that speed instead of slowing down, the jeep started to spin round and round throwing his and Ava's head at all angles. Arul could feel the seat belt cutting painfully through his shoulder and stomach with every jerk. He attempted to stop the jeep at any part of the road that would be able to take the brunt of it. However all his attempts were completely fruitless.

The road was too narrow and the only barriers on the road were the light iron ones that were used to indicate bends on a curved road. Hitting those would serve no purpose since they were not strong enough to bear the weight of the jeep—especially not at the speed they were spinning at. With every spin Arul looked around desperately trying to find a spot that would lessen the impact for him and Ava. He knew the split second decision was all he had if he had to save their lives.

It happened even before he could act on it.

The last thing he remembered was the malicious smile of the spirit, Ava's screams and the jeep toppling over the cliff towards the sea and towards imminent death....

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 11

Arul could hear a low buzz of conversation in the background. He felt very irritated; annoyed. At the disturbance that was hindering his deep sleep. He wanted to sleep for some more time. He could feel his head pounding as if somebody was in the midst of hammering it with a sledge hammer and even the low buzz of conversation—no matter how softly spoken the words were, felt like another blow to his head.

He wanted all the noise to stop and tried to protest against all the commotion. But it seemed to be such an effort to just force his eyes open. His eyelids felt so heavy—as if the upper and the lower eyelids were stuck together. Very slowly, he tried to open his eyes in order to ask everybody to just shut up and let him sleep. Never before had he felt a headache that was this intense.

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Ava's face peering at his. She had scratches all over her face and there was a bandage covering her left eyebrow. Her left cheek had a dark blue bruise that seemed to have been caused by something heavy that had hit the cheek. She looked completely worn out and there were faint purple shadows under her eyes. But in spite of all that she seemed to be more concerned about him.

"Arul, sweetie, are you all right?" She asked anxiously.

Arul was completely perplexed. *What happened?* He wondered in a state of panic. *How did Ava get hurt? Why is she so worried about me?*

But he didn't have to ponder long; within a few seconds, everything came rushing back to him. The spirit, their accident, the jeep falling off the cliff; it all came back to him—like scenes from a film that seemed to reenact themselves in his mind. He could feel his body growing numb with fear as he relived those moments one after the other. His eyes grew wide with fear as gradually panic started to seep in, into his mind.

He tried to sit up, wanting to take Ava in his arms, wanting to assure her and himself as well that in spite of all adversities, they were still alive and breathing. But the piercing pain in his head didn't allow him any movement.

"Hush darling" said Ava concerned, seeing him try to get up. "Don't get up. Let the doctor have a look at you first."

Arul turned his head around and saw that there were other people in the room. The room looked quite familiar to him though he didn't recognize it at first; but before long he realized that he was a patient in his own clinic. Through the windows he could see his daily view of teak and mahogany forests. Through the door, he could see Vasantha sitting and writing something at her desk in the reception. He was lying on the hospital bed that had been kept for the patients—the irony was that it had never been used before.

*Looks like it was waiting to be inaugurated by me.* Arul thought wryly. His further thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

"Good morning."

Arul turned his head towards the voice. He saw a man of around fifty, standing near the door and smiling at him. He was Chinese; medium height, medium built with very alert eyes and an air of extreme competence.

“My name is Dr. Wong. We have not had the pleasure to meet before, and I wish we had met under different circumstances. I have a clinic in town.”

“Oh yes Dr. Wong. I am Arul.” said Arul extending his hand. “I have heard so many great things about you and have always wanted to pay you a visit from the time we arrived here, but you know.... something else always came up.”

“Yeah I know what you mean.” said Dr Wong shaking Arul’s extended hand. “For us doctors, we are always caught between curing people with genuine illness and trying to convince the others that they are absolutely fine.” he said with a good natured laugh.

“So which category do I fall under doctor?” asked Arul with a smile trying to hide his anxiety.

“Well, there is a slight trauma at your parietal lobe on the right. But, I don’t think you have a concussion. Your vitals look good and on initial check up, there doesn’t seem to be any internal hemorrhage. However I would like to check your reflexes once.”

After a thorough check up of all Arul’s reflexes, and his vision, Dr. Wong cheerfully announced that Arul was completely alright, except for the superficial injuries.

“In fact,” said Dr. Wong, “It’s a miracle how you survived. If it wasn’t for the tree trunk that stopped the jeep, you would have ended up in the sea. You are so lucky that some of the fishermen on their way home had discovered the jeep hanging and brought it up. It was they who notified me that the new doctor and his wife were unconscious in their jeep. Thankfully no time was wasted. If not, in an island as remote as this, it would have been very difficult to have organized a search party to look for you.”

“How did it happen?” He asked Arul curiously.

Arul looked around the room. He saw Faizal, a few of the loggers, and some other people from the village that he had treated in the past all standing there looking concerned and probably a little curious as well.

Some twisted part of the human mind always likes to hear stories of mishaps and misfortunes—as long as it is not them that get affected as a result.

Arul saw Ava, pale and exhausted with the same question on her face; except, her face also portrayed fear, her eyes searching his face for the real reason of the accident.

“I lost control of the jeep.” he said in a low voice.

Arul didn’t want to tell anyone anything more; who was going to believe him even if he did tell the truth? In his mind he felt really ashamed for not having paid more attention to Ava’s fears before.

Seeing Arul lost deep in thought, Dr. Wong didn’t want to push him further. He was aware that patients who had gone through such traumatic experience didn’t like to talk about it because it took them back to the time of the accident again.

“Well anyway,” said Dr. Wong briskly. “I think you should be here resting for a few more hours and then probably in the evening Faizal can drive you home. However, incase you feel nauseous, giddy or have blurry vision, call me immediately.” He added passing Arul his business card.

“Thank you so much doctor.” said Arul taking the card from his hand. “I will definitely give you a call; though hopefully it will be a call to invite you over for dinner and not because of my blurry vision.” Arul smiled weakly.

“Of course! I would like love to come over and try some of your wife’s Indian cooking someday. But you get better first. Take lots of rest and try not to overwork yourself.” said Dr. Wong patting Arul on his shoulder.

On the way out the doctor insisted that everybody leave the room and let Arul rest. All the loggers and villagers waved at Arul murmuring ‘get well soon’ and other similar phrases and walked out of the door one by one. Within a couple of minutes Arul was left alone in the room since Ava too went out to see off Dr. Wong.

Being alone in the room got Arul thinking. He knew they were in serious danger; this was just the beginning of a fate far too terrifying to comprehend. They had just missed death by an inch by some divine miracle. He was worried; more for Ava than for himself. She was all he had and he promised himself no matter what, he would never let anything happen to her.

*But what am I supposed to do?* Thought Arul feeling completely helpless. *How do you triumph over an entity that is already dead?* He was still having difficulty grasping the fact that all that happened the night before, was indeed real. It simply was completely beyond the threshold of his beliefs.

He heard footsteps and looked up to see Ava standing near the door. It broke his heart to see her beautiful face both battered physically and mentally. He could imagine the anguish she had gone through and his blood turned cold thinking that she had actually spent nights alone in the house. He thanked God in a silent prayer for looking after her.

Ava slowly walked towards the bed and sat down beside Arul. She ran her hand very gently over the bandage that was wrapped around Arul’s head. Finally, when Arul took her in his arms, she couldn’t stop. She broke down into loud sobs, hugging him back tightly kissing him on his neck, his cheek, his forehead, and every other part of his face.

“It’s okay. I am fine, don’t worry.” said Arul gently, patting her on the back.

Ava looked up. Her eyes were red with tears still brimming on the eyelids; her lips were trembling with the pressure of controlling her sobs.

“What are we going to do?” she whispered.

“We will find a way hon. We have to.” said Arul determinedly.

“Where is Faizal,” asked Arul after a pause.

“He is waiting outside.” said Ava. “Noraini is also here.” she added.

“Ask them to come in please. I need to know how to get ourselves out of this mess. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that ghosts and supernatural beings were real.” said Arul in an incredulous voice.

“Did *you* believe in ghosts?” He questioned Ava.

Ava shook her head. “Not before I met a real live one.” she said jokingly smiling through her tears and wiping her nose in a tissue.

Ava asked Noraini and Faizal to come in. Both of them looked extremely worried. It was strange seeing the ever smiling face of Faizal now grim with worry. They settled down into two chairs, while Ava sat on the bed beside Arul. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room since nobody seemed to know what was appropriate to mention.

In spite of what happened the previous night, Arul felt foolish talking to anyone about ghouls and spirits; while Ava, Faizal and Noraini were all thinking back to the night of the exorcism when they had actually seen the spirit leave.

*Do spirits leave and come back again?* Wondered Ava.

It was Ava who spoke first. She related to Noraini and Faizal what happened at the house when she was alone waiting for Arul. How finally at the last moment Arul came in and they ran out of the house with the spirit following them—crawling out of the front door. She also told them that she and Arul had discussed everything, and informed them about his nightmares.

“And,” she added looking at Noraini, “we had decided to go see you and on the way to your house, we had the accident.”

“But how did the accident happen?” asked Faizal puzzled. “I had personally checked the jeep yesterday and there was no problem. Did the brakes fail? It does sometime if the jeep is overheated. Was the jeep over heated?” He asked Arul anxiously trying to find a natural cause of the accident, because he didn’t want to think otherwise.

Arul was in a dilemma; he was still not sure how he should describe the presence of a supernatural being without sounding foolish. He hesitated; not knowing whether he should tell them how the accident happened. He realized that even Ava had not seen the figure and she was also staring at him with questioning eyes—wanting to know the reason behind their encounter with death.

He saw all of them looking at him expectantly and knew he had to tell them the real reason. If he wanted them to help him get rid of the menacing shadow that seemed to follow him everywhere, he needed to tell them the truth.

He described the nefarious monster that had appeared near the accelerator and brake pedals of the jeep. How it had held his leg in an iron grip and pressed it on the accelerator while he tried to swerve the vehicle into the divider. Arul shuddered recalling the intense fear and disgust that had engulfed him as the spirit had slowly started crawling up towards his face. He sat up and pulled up his jeans revealing his right ankle and sure enough, there were blue-black bruises in the form of finger marks circling his ankle.

The room was quiet once more. Everybody was lost in their own thoughts; none of them could comprehend what was happening. It was Noraini who broke the silence this time.

“I cannot understand.” she said. “We saw the spirit leave.”

“Do spirits comeback even after being exorcised?” asked Ava voicing her previous question.

“No, they usually do not. We saw her go into the light. Once they go to light, they go away from world forever.” said Noraini trying her best to speak perfect English.

“So which means that we are dealing with another spirit.” said Faizal slowly.

“Can we exorcise this spirit?” asked Ava hopefully turning towards Noraini.

“Ma’am” said Noraini gently. This spirit very powerful one, only very powerful spirit can kill people. I not strong enough to do ritual and still we need to know, who the spirit is. If don’t know cannot do anything.”

In spite of all the worries, Ava couldn’t help but admire how well Noraini spoke in English with her.

“But how can we find out who the spirit is? What have we done to it that it wants to kill us? We have never hurt anybody knowingly.” said Ava frantically, not to anybody in particular, but then to everybody present. She wanted a solution and wanted somebody to be blamed for her living nightmares and was frustrated that she could find neither.

Throughout the discussions, Arul had been extremely quiet. His mind was in turmoil; he was fighting against the urge to believe that he actually knew what was happening—who it was that wanted to harm them. He knew that the time had come to tell them the deep dark secret that he had been hiding. He had prayed for a long time that this day would never come. He only hoped that Ava would understand and forgive him.

“I think I know who it is” said Arul quietly.

The words were almost whispered, but all of them seemed to have heard him. There was an air of thick silence in the room; it was as if they had even stopped breathing. The only sound was that of the fan spinning noisily in the room and outside, the faint buzz of the chainsaws used by the loggers to cut the trees.

Everybody inclusive of Ava turned towards him with a shocked expression.

Taking a deep breath Arul started narrating his tale...

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 12

It was late December 2005; though Mumbai being a coastal city mostly built on reclamation land didn't have a severe winter, one could still feel the slight bite of the chilly air especially at night; but sometimes even in the afternoon. Everywhere in the city there was an air of excitement—all looking forward to the coming of the New Year.

Most of the people hoping to have something better in the coming year, while some rare ones hoping to have the same amount of success that they had in the previous one. Wherever some attention was paid to conversations, one could hear plans for the New Year's Eve party or something similar. It was as if even Mumbai, one of the busiest cities in the world had decided to just relax a little bit.

Arul had been lying down on the couch in the doctors' lounge. The room was almost as big as a hall with a TV in one corner, a few scattered chairs here and there, books lying on the few tables that were around and a couch which was occupied by him at that time. Green drab hospital curtains fluttered in the windows that overlooked the nearest buildings, which in Bandra, one of the most crowded areas of Mumbai was probably just a few feet away. A refrigerator and vending machine in another corner of the room provided unhealthy snacks to the doctors on call.

Arul glanced at the clock; it was almost nine in the evening. In one hour he would finish his duty and could go home. He was really looking forward to a long bath and a good night's sleep. He could never nap in the hospital like he had seen some of the other doctors do, in-between their duties. He needed to be in his own bed to have a proper sleep.

That week had been an exceptionally busy and exhausting one. He had been on call in the emergency room for the last twenty hours. Before that he had performed quite a few operations ranging from *appendectomy* to *herrniorrhaphy*. Even the next morning he had another surgery to perform. It was quite a serious and intricate surgery on the liver. Arul was very excited to have an opportunity to work along with one of the country's best hepatobiliary surgeon. They were supposed to perform a *partial hepatectomy*.

It was a procedure where an injured or infected part of a liver has to be removed---in this case the patient had a localized tumor in one of the lobes of the liver. It was a very difficult and elaborate procedure involving multiple variables that could go wrong; this reminded Arul that he should to brush up on the medical books dealing with the operation procedure and similar case studies just to be sure that he was prepared to handle the operation. He promised himself that he would get up early the next day and do some reading.

Suddenly the air boomed with the sound from the speakers. To his dismay, Arul heard the usual mechanical, expressionless voice calling out his name.

“Paging for Dr. Arul Mathur, please report to OT 7 stat.”

That one sentence put an end to Arul's hope of going home in an hour. His heart sank because he knew that there was no way he will go back home soon, although he had

promised Ava that he would be home for dinner. He really didn't know how much longer Ava was going to be patient with his erratic hours.

He dragged himself up from the couch and unwillingly walked towards the elevator that would take him to the fifth floor where all the operation theatres were located. While walking towards the nurses' station on the fifth floor, he glanced at the young girl lying in a gurney on the side of a corridor. She was holding her stomach and squirming while tears of pain flowed profusely down her cheeks. There was a lady and two gentlemen waiting by her side, all looking very anxious. The moment they saw Arul coming, they rushed towards him and started to speak all at once.

Arul held up his hand. "Please," he said. "I know that you are very worried, but let me first see what is wrong with her, and then I will update you on the diagnosis."

Hearing his firm and confident voice they moved aside relieved that she was in good hands. Arul walked briskly to the nurses' station. He learnt from the OT nurse that the young girl had been diagnosed with acute appendicitis by her family doctor and had been rushed to the hospital.

Arul hurriedly checked the girl for her vitals and could gather that she was in severe pain. She was breathing in shallow gasps, and her heart was beating very fast. He knew he would have to perform appendectomy on her as soon as possible. He ordered the nurse on duty to prepare her for surgery immediately.

"Who is the anesthetist?" Arul asked the scrub nurse.

"Dr. Johnson" she replied.

Arul's heart sank. Dr. Johnson was gradually getting a bad reputation of drinking when on duty. Thankfully till now he had not made any significant blunders in the OT—being one of the veterans in the field, but Arul was never too comfortable working with him. Moreover Dr. Johnson was the brother-in-law of the chief of surgery and had pretty good connections with the hospital's board of trustees; making Arul or any other surgeon for that matter, reluctant to make any complaints against him.

After all which young promising doctor wanted their reputation to be tarnished as a tattle tale? The unspoken code among the medical professionals were always to watch each other's back. Thus all they could pray for was that, they would get another anesthetist instead of Dr. Johnson during their turns to conduct surgeries.

Most of the time they could request for a particular anesthetist if the surgery was planned a few days in advance. But in emergencies such as this, they had no choice but to go ahead with the anesthetist on call.

Cursing his bad luck Arul walked back towards the patient.

"What time was your last meal?" he asked the girl gently while examining her stomach to verify the exact source of the pain.

"She had her lunch at 12, and then started complaining about a stomachache." said the lady who Arul presumed must be the mother; they looked similar. "After that I gave her some pain killers, but when her pain didn't go down, we took her to see our family doctor, and he asked us to come here."

Arul looked at the girl, lying on the gurney. She was quite young—not more than nineteen or twenty. Even through the pain she was beautiful; she had a pair of large expressive eyes that were the color of the midnight sky. She looked pale against the green pillow cover and the green sheet. Her hair created an irregular frame around her small angular face.

“What is your name?” Arul asked the girl softly, trying to take her concentration away from the pain.

“Mridula.” she answered with a lot of effort; clearly it was really painful for her to talk.

“Mridula,” said Arul gently. “You have appendicitis; which means that your appendix is causing the pain in your stomach. We need to remove it surgically. But don’t worry, it is a very simple procedure and will take only fifteen minutes to half an hour maximum.”

“You can probably go home in two days okay?” He added.

“My chest hurts too.” she said putting a hand on her chest.

“Well, you see, you have something called acute appendicitis. In such cases, the vermiform appendix may not be in the usual place which is generally here.” said Arul pressing her lower abdomen on the right side.

“There is a huge possibility that your appendix has moved from its original space and that sometimes may feel like chest pain--rather pain in the ribs. It can also be that the fear and anxiety of the impending surgery is causing you to have a panic attack and that is what is causing your chest pains. Just relax and take deep breaths. Don’t worry, I promise you that you will be okay within the next couple of days.”

Arul asked the nurse to prepare her for the surgery, but before Mridula was wheeled away, she caught Arul’s hand.

“Doctor” she said softly. “Can we wait a while before I am taken inside? I am waiting for somebody to come.” she added shyly.

Looking at her face which turned red while she spoke, Arul could make out that the ‘somebody’ must be her boyfriend. He was really amused but couldn’t imagine how someone being in so much pain, could still want to wait to see her boyfriend before being taken in for surgery.

*Wow!* He thought, remembering his and Ava’s courting days. *Her boyfriend is one lucky guy.*

Noticing the look of expectation on her face Arul felt very bad at not being able to keep her request. But she needed to be operated as soon as possible. He was not sure whether her appendix was willing to wait for her boyfriend before it burst.

Looking at Mridula he shook his head regretfully.

“I am sorry Mridula, but that won’t be possible. You need to be prepped for the operation as soon as possible. But don’t worry;” he added smilingly, “I am sure your ‘somebody’ will still be waiting for you after your operation is over.”

Arul nodded towards the orderlies to wheel her away and went to change for the surgery.

On the way he saw Dr. Johnson walking briskly towards the pre-op area and realized that he must be going to see Mridula and prepare her for the surgery.

Mridula was lying on the gurney in an area that was curtained off from the main hall waiting nervously for her forthcoming surgery. This was the first time that she was going to have a surgery and was very scared though she didn’t let anyone else realize it—not even her mother.

*I am sure I am going to be fine.* She thought, trying to boost up her courage. The doctor promised me I will be fine. Anyway it's just appendicitis and I have heard that a lot of my college friends have had the same operation.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the curtains were pushed aside and the nurse and another man entered. He introduced himself as Dr. Johnson the anesthetist.

The first thing that Mridula noticed about Dr. Johnson were his eyes that seemed to be slightly reddish. Apart from that he looked like any middle aged doctor that Mridula had seen. He was may be in his mid fifties, not too tall, almost fat—though not quite there yet, but with a puffed up face. He reminded her of one of her uncles.

After checking her for a few minutes he left, instructing the nurse on the way out in a low voice of all the things that needed to be done. Mridula could hear a faint buzz of conversation outside.

“Get all her blood and urine works done and prepare her for the OT.” Dr. Johnson told the nurse.

Arul was walking towards the OT when one of the scrub nurses came hurrying towards him.

“Doctor,” she asked Arul hesitatingly. “What about an ECG? Should we do one along with the blood works just in case, since she is complaining about chest pain?”

“Did you ask Dr. Johnson about it?” asked Arul curiously, knowing that it was the anesthetist's duty to take a patient's history and declare her to be fit for the procedure before she is wheeled in to the OT.

“I did, but got no response from him.”

Arul looked at her sharply. Although her lips were not moving, her eyes seemed to tell him that Dr. Johnson may not be completely capable to handle the operation.

But Arul decided to play it safe and not make any comments that may get him into trouble later with the hospital board or anyone else for that matter. *If Dr. Johnson thought he could handle the operation, then let him;* he thought annoyed.

To the nurse he said “I can see she is a very healthy girl, and I am sure it has nothing to do with her heart. Moreover we don't have the time to do an ECG now. And nurse,” he added, feeling more irritated, “it is not my job to decide whether she needs an ECG, if you couldn't talk about it to Dr. Johnson, then that is your problem and his.

The nurse's face turned crimson, she knew that her concern was futile as the egos of the doctors in the hospital definitely seemed to be larger than their responsibility towards saving lives. She put her head down and walked off.

Arul knew that he had been very rude. But he was truly in no mood to be nice to anybody—fatigue seemed to be slowing him down with every step. Moreover now being sure that Dr. Johnson was going to come into the OT after having a few drinks, and he was powerless to do anything about it without jeopardizing his job, Arul was more annoyed.

He turned around and walked towards the patient's family members. There he informed them about the upcoming surgery. At the same time assuring them that it was nothing to worry about.

“Thank you doctor,” said one of the gentlemen extending his hand to shake Arul's. “I am Rajesh Patel, Mridula's father. We were so worried. Moreover next month is her engagement.”

“Engagement?” asked Arul unable to hide his surprise. “Isn’t she too young to be married?”

“You ask her.” said Mr. Patel spreading his hand in exasperation. “She is in love and insists in marrying her boyfriend before they both leave to study further in USA. I didn’t have a choice, you know kids nowadays. If I didn’t agree, they would eventually still do what they want.” He added shaking his head ruefully.

“I know what you mean.” said Arul smiling.

Patting Mr. Patel’s hand and assuring them once again that everything will be alright, Arul went in to get ready for the operation himself.

As Arul entered the changing area, he was greeted by an unnaturally cheerful Dr. Johnson who was changing into his OT scrubs; his extra cheer made it evident that he was under quite a strong influence of alcohol. All Arul could manage was a slight nod of acknowledgement—as the stench of whiskey hit him hard. Arul thought grimly that it was the last time he would keep quiet about Dr. Johnson’s drinking problem. The next time he finds Dr. Johnson drinking on call, he would make a formal complaint against him to the hospital administrator. Thus having made up his mind and praying all goes well inside the operation theatre, Arul started scrubbing and cleaning his hands vigorously, getting prepared for the approaching surgery.

Mridula had been on the phone with Rahul when she first started getting the sudden piercing pains in her stomach. She had been getting similar pains over the last two weeks. However, they had not been this severe before. She clutched her stomach willing it to go away. Luckily, after a few minutes the pain subsided.

She had plans for a movie with Rahul that evening and didn’t want to cancel it. So she decided not to tell anybody about the pain. Mridula was in love with Rahul as passionately as millions of young girls all around the world were in love with their boyfriends. She wished she could spend every moment with him.

Rahul was the cousin of Mridula’s best friend Jhanvi and they had met during Jhanvi’s birthday party. It was love at first sight for Mridula.

A young man of twenty three, with movie star good looks and a warm smile swept Mridula off her feet instantly. Rahul had just gotten his bachelor’s degree in commerce. He was supposed to go to USA to do his MBA. However neither he nor Mridula were willing to be away from each other for three years.

He wanted to marry Mridula and take her along with him. There were quite a number of protests from both sides of the family—especially Mridula’s since her parents felt that she was really too young to decide on her life partner; but eventually everybody had to give in to the adamancy of the young lovebirds.

The wedding preparations were going on at full swing at the time when the abdominal pains started tormenting Mridula.

By noon, Mridula was in considerable pain. She knew that she will not be able to hide it from her mother. At lunchtime, she could hardly chew her food. Looking at her pale face, her mother was extremely concerned and pestered her till she admitted the excruciating pains that tormented her stomach.

When with painkillers the pain didn't subside, they had to take her to their family doctor and eventually the hospital.

Mridula was very sad with the turn of events as she had been looking forward to spending the evening with Rahul alone. They had not met in almost a week, since he had also been busy with sending out invitations and other wedding preparations. She had called him and told him about the operation on the way to the hospital, and he had promised that he would be waiting for her right outside the operation theatre when she came out.

"I want you to be there when I open my eyes." Mridula had said over the phone.

"I will be there long before that, I promise." Rahul had answered worriedly.

Even then, while she was being wheeled into the operation theatre, Mridula wished she could have seen him before she went in for the operation.

The sterile metallic operation theatres of the hospital had become a part of Arul's life. Now, he hardly noticed the bright steel surfaces, the faint smells of the anesthetics, the chill of the air conditioning turned high, or the various life support systems that were kept neatly lined up in a row at one part of the wall.

When Arul walked into the OT, he found the patient had been strapped to the operating table, prepared for the surgery. The cardiac monitors were tracking her pulse and heartbeat and a saline drip had been inserted into a vein in her left arm. She was wearing a white hospital gown. Arul couldn't help but admire the way she looked so beautiful even in the most unflattering circumstances.

He walked up towards her while Dr. Johnson positioned himself near her head. Arul smiled at her reassuringly seeing the slightly scared look on her face.

"Relax Mridula." he said. "It's a very simple process and you will be under general anesthesia. So you won't feel a thing okay."

Mridula gulped and nodded her head nervously. At Arul's signal, Dr. Johnson gave a shot of thiopental inside the tube transporting saline drips into her vein. Within a minute Mridula's eyes started to flutter and before long she was in a state of deep unconsciousness. He then intubated Mridula and maintained the state of unconsciousness by supplying halothane gas at intervals.

Arul anxiously glanced at Dr. Johnson while he monitored the anesthesia to see whether he was completely fit, thankfully Dr. Johnson seemed to know what he was doing. He then glanced at the machines monitoring her heartbeat and blood pressure and found everything satisfactory. He picked up a scalpel and made an insertion on the right hand side of the lower abdomen. He carried on with the procedure with the familiarity of someone who had done this surgery numerous times.

Suddenly half way through the surgery, the rate of her heartbeat started to increase, leading to an increase in the blood pressure. Her pressure showed 300 over 180 and was increasing further at a rapid pace. Nobody had expected it---least of all Arul. He looked towards Dr. Johnson expecting him to inject the right drug to bring her heartbeat back to normal, but looking at his dazed, blank eyes Arul's heart sank. He realized that the anesthetist was in no condition to perform his duties. Quickly recovering from his initial

shock, Arul shouted at the nurse to give Mridula a shot of adrenaline. But before anything could be done, Mridula went in to spasms, while the machines started to go crazy.

The cardiac monitor started showing very erratic heartbeats and while Arul tried his best to keep her alive, the machine showed a flat line indicating that the patient's heart has stopped beating.

Arul frantically asked for the defibrillator and ordered the nurse to charge it to 150. There was no response. When at a charge of 250 and 300, there was still no beating of the heart, and all the other life support machines also indicated that she cannot be brought back to life, Arul jumped up on the table and started performing CPR on her with his hands. But try as he might, he couldn't make her heart beat again. After trying for almost half an hour, he gave up when he felt Dr. Johnson's hand on his shoulder gesturing him that it's too late and that she was gone.

It was as if Arul returned to his senses. He climbed down from the table and put his head down, defeated and frustrated; terribly guilty for not doing something about Dr. Johnson earlier.

Everything was over within half an hour and the lifeless body of the young girl lay on the table. There was pin drop silence in the room—the only sound was the flat lining tone from the monitor.

Arul stood transfixed at the same place----he had absolutely no clue as to what had just happened. She had been perfectly alright, responding well to the anesthesia. Suddenly for her heart to give way like that was unthinkable. Even when everybody had left the room, Arul was still there. His surgical gloves covered hands had her blood all over them.

He looked at his hands, silently blaming himself for not having paid more attention to her chest pains and only assuming the most common reasons. He realized that he should have paid more attention to the nurses' suggestions—in fact his biggest mistake was to allow Dr. Johnson to act as an anesthetist even though he was clearly under the influence of alcohol.

*How could he have been so stupid? How could he have been so selfish?* Arul thought. But his conscience had no answers for his guilt. He felt personally responsible for her death. He just couldn't help but think how a young life with so much dreams and aspirations ended right in front of his eyes.

Someone whom he had confidently promised that everything would be fine, now lay lifeless right in front of him. Arul realized regretfully that the mistake was made due to his arrogance, his unwillingness to stand for what was right and his self-centeredness, thinking of only himself and his career—thinking of how good he was. And all that had made him look down on a nurse's suggestion and a helpless girl had to pay the price for his ego of thinking he was the best.

He looked down at the young girl on the operating table. Her lifeless hand lay there with the saline needle still attached to it, though the nurse had turned off the tap at the source. He saw the tag on her wrist. "**Mridula Patel, Age 20yrs Female.**"

*Three short phrases that seemed to have summarized the entire life of this young girl,* thought Arul. He just couldn't bring himself to believe that she was not alive. He ran his fingers over the tag, and it came out of her hand very easily---almost as if she wanted him to keep it as a reminder to be more careful next time, thought Arul remorsefully.

He put the tag inside his trousers' pocket which by right he was not supposed to be wearing in the OT—but then he was Dr. Arul Mathur. The young and upcoming surgeon of one of the most prestigious hospitals in the city. He did not have to wear the pants that came as a set with the surgical scrubs if he didn't want to. And since he found the pants uncomfortable, he always wore the scrubs over his own trousers. Most of the time the management looked the other way when Arul made these small deviations from the general rules of the hospital; after all he did bring in big money for the place.

Slowly with the tag in his pocket, Arul turned around and walked out of the OT wondering how he was going to face her parents and tell them that they had lost their beloved daughter.

Over the next few days, he immersed himself in his duties trying to forget about Mridula. The following week he was called in by the hospital administrator Dr. Rao. Behind closed doors, he informed Arul that the autopsy report for Mridula Patel had arrived. According to it, she had a congenital heart condition known as *myocarditis*. Arul knew that it was something that caused the inflammation or swelling of the heart muscles where the heart starts to exert pressure on the sternum. *That was why she was complaining about the chest pains*, thought Arul guiltily.

He was informed that due to that she had arrhythmia which eventually led to a cardiac arrest that killed her. Arul was silent throughout the entire report. He knew that it was his negligence that had taken her life. If only he had paid more attention to her complaints of chest pains.

He was jolted out of his thoughts when he heard Dr. Rao saying that they had an enquiry into the matter and it had come to his notice that Dr. Johnson had been under the influence of alcohol when he was on duty.

"In fact," said Dr. Rao, "it seems he has been having a drinking problem for quite sometime now. But what I can't understand is how nobody brought it up in a formal complaint."

"Did you know that he was drunk on that day?" He asked Arul, looking straight at him.

Arul nodded, not trusting his voice.

"And you still didn't say anything," said Dr. Rao knowingly. "In fact I heard that the scrub nurse had asked you about a second opinion for an ECG and you too had waived it off. Dr. Johnson was working under the influence of alcohol, but what about you Dr. Mathur? Shouldn't you have done something?"

As a matter of fact," said Dr. Rao, now walking up and down his room—clearly very upset. "The first thing you should have done as the surgeon who was in charge of the operation was to announce him unfit to be in there. Inside the OT, you are like the captain of a ship; you should make all decisions knowing that the patient's life lies in your hands. You can't blame the anesthetist, or anyone else. All you have is to blame yourself. I can't imagine someone who is as good at his job as you are would behave in such an unprofessional manner. I understand, no surgeon wanted to complain about Dr. Johnson because of his connections to the chief of surgery, but that is a very wrong approach, which I never expected out of you." He stood in front of Arul with his hands resting on his desk.

Arul was extremely ashamed. He knew that Dr. Rao was right—every word of his hit Arul like an arrow. If only he had done his job better, Mridula would be still alive, he thought.

“Dr. Johnson has been asked to resign with immediate effect.” continued Dr. Rao. “We have not fired him because of his long association with this hospital. And I think you too should take some time off. I know you are one of the most competent and promising surgeons in this hospital. And even the most competent of us make mistakes. But Mridula’s father is very influential and her uncle is in the board of trustees of the hospital. Thus they have demanded that action must be taken, and I am sorry I couldn’t convince them that it was not your fault. I think a leave of absence would be good for all the parties concerned. I have to look into what is best for this hospital and at this moment we can’t afford to be sued or have a bad reputation.”

“I am truly sorry Arul.” He added for the first time sounding genuinely sorry

Arul dragged himself out of the chair and left. On the way back to the doctor’s lounge he had a revelation. He realized that this was not the oath that he had taken as a doctor. His arrogance and position in the hospital had made him into one of those unfeeling power mongers with a God syndrome.

His head was buzzing; he didn’t have a clue to what should be his next course of action. All his ambitions, all his goals had just gone crashing with a cruel bite of reality. He realized that, it was not the big bucks that he raked in for the hospital—it was the ability to do so without making a mistake; but when that mistake did happen, he was all alone. Suddenly he was not the most promising surgeon as he always thought he was. He didn’t want to tell Ava anything. Things had not been good between them to begin with since his long hours in the hospital.

What ever it was, Arul decided to would quit his job at the hospital. Understanding the politics that happened along with the surgeries in a private hospital, Arul realized that he was not prepared to be a pawn to them any longer.

But then where would he go? He thought. He needed a job definitely, but where was he going to get one so soon especially with the number of doctors in India?

Like an oasis in the desert he heard about the news of a timber company looking for a doctor, and without another thought he applied for the post. Within a few days they had got back to him, and the rest was history.

“And that had been the reason for all the supernatural activities I think.” sighed Arul.

The room was silent. Arul wanted to look up to see Ava’s face, but he didn’t have the courage to see the contempt or the anger that he assumed she would be feeling at that time. Ava was very proud of the fact that he was a doctor, and was responsible for saving people’s lives.

*What would she think of me now, knowing that my negligence had taken a life?* Arul wondered. He glanced towards Ava from the corner of his eyes and saw the tears glistening on her eyelashes.

“When did this happen? Why didn’t you tell me before?” asked Ava both mystified and hurt at Arul’s secrecy.

“Remember, the night in December I came back home late?” asked Arul. “The day we were supposed to go for a party? You were waiting for me all dressed up and I had completely forgotten about it?”

Ava still looked confused.

“The day when you were hearing an extremely eerie song? Nightmares or something similar to it?”

Ava nodded, she remembered.

“Yes. And you threw off the CD yelling that it was a stupid song. We had one of the biggest fights in the history of our marriage that day.” she added wryly.

“Well, that was the night when she died on my table” said Arul quietly staring at the floor.

Once again there was a silence. Everybody was trying to understand the implications of what they were dealing with.

Ava remembered with a chill how the same song had turned up on the night when she first came face to face with the spirit. Now she understood that all the times when she was not sure why they were being victimized, the clues were always there, right in front of her.

She looked at Arul’s pale face. She could commiserate with him. She realized that he too must have been going through an agonizing time. She touched his cheek tenderly, showing that she understood.

Seeing her face filled with pity and love for him Arul forgot that there were others in the room. He took her in his arms and buried his face on her neck.

“Please forgive me darling. I should have told you everything. I just didn’t have the courage to face my mistake. I didn’t want you to be disappointed with me.”

Ava stroked his hair. “Its okay love, I know that you too have suffered immensely. Perhaps next time you would not underestimate my love for you and will tell me everything that bothers you.” she smiled weakly.

“But now, what are we supposed to do?” asked Ava turning towards Noraini after both she and Arul and regained some amount of composure.

“Will the same ritual work for this spirit as well?”

Noraini shook her head doubtfully. “I am really not sure that I am powerful enough to fight her. We would need someone stronger and with more experience. And I think I know just the right person.” she added with a worried smile.

## Chapter 13

It was late in the afternoon and there was an unnatural stillness that enveloped the clinic; something that Arul had never experienced before, even during the slow afternoons when there were no patients for him to see.

The long wooden benches in the porch looked forlorn—bare without any patients sitting on them and waiting for the doctor; but then it was not really surprising, seeing how the doctor himself was a patient for the time being.

Noraini had gone back promising to talk to somebody she said was powerful enough to help them.

Faizal had followed her. Seeing Ava and Arul lying in the clinic, badly hurt, he had made a promise to himself that no matter what, he would stand by the young couple through this trying time—perhaps the day he had seen Ava cry her heart out, his mind had already adopted the role of a friend, somebody who would go beyond the call of duty. And somehow, before he even realized it, Faizal noticed that he had become a pillar for them to lean on. He was determined to remain as that till the end.

Arul felt very restless, a gnawing feeling kept troubling his heart—a heightened sense awareness of his surroundings made it very difficult for him to close his eyes and drift off to sleep. In fact, every time he closed his eyes, he felt someone watching him—someone he couldn't see with his eyes open. He sat up on the bed and looked around the room; there was nothing out of the ordinary. He peeped outside and could see Vasantha busy labeling a big bunch of medicine bottles and found Ava in a deep sleep on the next bed. Even in her sleep, there were slight frowns lining her forehead, as if she was expecting some kind of danger any moment.

Arul couldn't bear it; he was not prepared to live in this fear forever. They would have to find a way. He was reluctant to go back to the house that night, but then where exactly were they actually safe? That thing had been following them everywhere, across seven seas. He sincerely hoped that the lady Noraini spoke about would be able to provide them a way out of this hell; if not, he didn't want to think about the consequences.

He was supposed to be resting, the painkillers were meant to make him drowsy, to sleep, while his body tended to the healing process. But although they were successful in numbing the throbbing in his head, his mind was too alert to surrender to sleep. Thoughts kept creeping into his mind—memories of patients that he had lost to death, the look of the thing that night, the accident; like a giant collage different images baffled his mind till he could hear voices in his head.

He was not sure whether these were the side effects of the various drugs that had probably mixed into a killer cocktail in his body, but in order to get rid of the restlessness he decided to take a walk to clear his head.

From the patio, Arul could see the aquamarine sea lying calm under the afternoon sun—the tide being out. The sea sparkled under the sun's rays like a bed of precious stones. Arul couldn't help thinking how something so beautiful had almost become his watery grave the previous night. He felt utterly lost; it was as if all the good things in life

were coming to an end; at every step he felt the ominous presence of doom. He needed to think, he needed to come up with his own solution, for his sake and Ava's. He didn't know what would happen if Noraini and the other lady was not able to exorcise the evil spirit.

*Whatever happens I won't let anything happen to Ava.* He thought.

He climbed down the patio steps and started walking towards the hills covered with teak and mahogany trees. That was where all the logging was done; felled tree trunks had been piled up in places waiting to be transported out. There was no one around, the sun was quite hot and Arul could feel the beads of sweat trickling down through the bandage in his forehead. But still he kept walking towards the trees that covered the hills in a blanket of green.

He chose a narrow path through the heavy undergrowth of ferns and mosses although it was quite difficult to walk through. At parts the path ceased to exist and Arul had to wriggle his way through thorny bushes that scratched his bare fore arms and sometimes his stomach and back, through the thin material of his half sleeved Hawaiian shirt. Feeling slight stings, he looked down and saw blood seeping through his shirt in thin lines from the scratches. But he still moved forward—he didn't know why.

He just knew instinctively that the solution of his problems lay somewhere inside the forest; somewhere in there he knew he would find the answer. His conscious mind was full of questions whereas his subconscious just kept on dragging him deeper and deeper into the forest. He had a vague sense of déjà vu. And before long, he realized that the surroundings resembled that of his dreams.

Arul didn't know how far or how long he walked before he came to a waterfall; it was quite high, probably around thirty feet in height. It fell straight down, to a deep black pool of water that kept on whirling and spinning in the centre like a doorway to the unknown and the unseen. The roaring noise from the waterfall was deafening and Arul wondered exactly how far in was he that he had not heard the sound of the waterfall from the site before.

The sides of the waterfall were framed by sharp jagged rocks that provided rough footholds that could be used to climb to the top. But they looked so dangerous, that once anybody slips, their bodies would be pierced through the razor-sharp rocks even before they hit the ground. In fact the rocks looked like an enormous demon with jagged teeth baring them all in a malevolent grin. *What am I doing here?* Thought Arul—his head turning involuntarily to one of the ledges on the waterfall.

She was sitting on the rocky ledge that jutted out close to the pool. Seeing her there, Arul somehow knew that he had come there because she had wanted him to. At that moment Arul understood that he would follow her anywhere—even to the end of the world and probably beyond.

She was beautiful. In fact, the term beautiful fell short to describe her physical looks. No woman he had seen before could capture the true essence of beauty like she did. Her doe eyes reflected the color of the black pool above which she was sitting. Her fair skin had an ethereal glow. Her lips were like the petals of pink roses with the morning dew on them. Seeing him approach, she stood up. She was wearing a white dress that reached just below her knees in a material so sheer, that Arul could see the outline of her young and perfect breasts with rosy nipples standing erect.

Her slim nubile body could be seen through the diaphanous material that clung to her in places that had got wet in the water; her long black hair created a sharp contrast against her rosy cheeks. She was the epitome of seduction.

Arul could feel a rapid tightening in his groin and his briefs suddenly felt too tight. A lump was slowly forming in his throat. He tried to gulp to clear his throat.

“I knew you would come.” she told Arul, smiling innocently. “I have been waiting for so long. I have been so lonely.”

She ran her silky tongue around her lips—a gesture so simple yet so seductive, that Arul could feel all his blood rushing down, rushing to his male organ and giving him an erection that was painfully throbbing and exciting at the same time. Never before had Arul felt anything that had aroused him to this extent. He was completely under her spell; his aching groin dictating the next course of action which seemed to be a perfect willingness—a necessity rather, to follow her anywhere that she wanted him to.

She started to climb upwards through the rocks with ease. Arul followed filled with a desire that was so intense that he forgot his aches and pains and for that moment, even Ava. All he wanted to do was to be with her—to take her then and there. He was mesmerized; his mind and his body both were just doing her bidding and he had no control over them.

She turned around. “Come darling, come to me. I want you so badly.”

Arul scrambled after her, trying not to slip while he climbed towards the top. She spoke so softly, but the loud noise of the waterfall couldn't drown the words. It was as if the air around him were whispering the words.

The climb was steep and agonizing. Along the way Arul kicked off his rubber slippers in frustration to get a better grip on the rocks. The skin under his feet was sore and blistered as the sharp edged rocks brutally pierced through his feet. He was almost crawling on his belly on the rocks on which she seemed to be walking so nonchalantly.

There was so much blood around----the sharp metallic smell of it making him giddy. His hands were sore, scratched and bleeding furiously from cuts on the rocks; his feet were worse. The rocks he gripped on turned scarlet with his blood, but Arul could feel no pain—his mind was that of a zombie, a man possessed with lust, and nothing else seemed important enough.

He was overwhelmed by a warm sense of euphoria, a feeling that everything was going to be all right, soothed him like a balm. Soon without realizing, he looked around and saw that he had reached the top of the waterfall.

She was waiting for him there; with a seductive smile on her lips and a wanton look in her eyes.

“Jump, my darling, please jump.” she said pointing towards the steep precipice of the waterfall. “We will be together forever after that. Don't you want to be with me?” she said looking at him with an erotic pout—a look of mischief glinting in her eyes, while she very slowly unbuttoned the first few buttons that ran down the front of her dress.

Her hypnotic words entranced Arul; he could not look away. His eyes followed the movements of her hand and her body movements drove him crazy. He was so turned on by her erotic beauty and gestures that he couldn't restrain himself. Grabbing her hands Arul pulled her roughly into his arms covering her mouth with his; kissing her with a hunger that seemed to drown him in its intensity. She responded to his kiss readily

without a moment's hesitation, holding his face between her palms kissing him back passionately—their tongues intertwined to an extent where coming out for air was not an option.

It was a kiss so sweet, so luscious that Arul wanted it to go on forever. He was willing to do anything to be with her because he understood that, he was hers now and her bidding was law to him.

When Arul in the midst of the kiss started groping for her buttons even without breaking the kiss, she pulled away.

“Not yet my love,” she said. “There's a lot of time for this when we are finally together. Do you want us to be together?” she asked softly her beautiful doe eyes staring into Arul's questioningly.

“Oh yes darling. Tell me, how can we be together? I will do anything.” he replied urgently still trying to kiss her.

“Anything?” she asked.

Grabbing her hips and kissing her neck Arul replied in a muffled voice “ Anythiiiiing”.

“Then prove it.” she said forcefully. “Go to the edge and jump for me so that we can be together forever.”

Arul mesmerized, slowly started walking towards the edge of the waterfall. She was so close to him that he was intoxicated with her body odor; he was spellbound—as if everything else in the world had lost their significance. He could see the roaring gushing water falling straight into the pool almost thirty feet below.

She walked up to him, and then turned around facing him while floating on top of the water. Arul knew he should not give in; being a man of science, deep inside his subconscious he could feel faint stirrings of panic. Something warning him to rethink his movements, telling him that there was something very wrong with the whole picture. But he had lost all sense of reality or will power and his body seemed to follow the coaxing of her voice and not the commands of his brain.

“All it takes to be with me is one jump,” her enticing, cajoling voice started breaking through the last reserves of Arul's self-control.

He put one step forward when he heard a piercing shriek that reverberated through all the trees—a shriek that probably saved his life.

“Nooooooo Aruuul nooooo! Stop! Oh please for God's sake stop!”

Ava's voice jolted him back to reality. He looked down and almost lost his balance seeing the force with which the water plunged deep down. He sat down on the edge, his body overtaken by violent shivers that he had no control over. Arul couldn't imagine that twice in two days he had almost lost his life.

The spirit had disappeared. There was no sign of the girl or anything that could have substantiated her presence even a few seconds back; nothing, except an eerie laugh that echoed through the trees and as a soft breeze blew across him he could almost swear he heard a soft whisper.

“It's not over yet.” the breeze seemed to say.

Arul looked down and saw Ava waiting near the edge of the pool of water. The climb down was as painful as surgery without anesthesia. On the way up, he didn't feel the sharp edges of the rock, however on the way down every jutting edge produced unbearable pain on his constantly bleeding hands and feet. Arul had to bite his lips to stop himself from screaming out in pain.

Once he was down in front of Ava, he could hardly look towards her, caught in his own web of guilt and shame; he had no idea how to explain anything to Ava.

How could he elucidate his reasons for almost taking his own life? How could he justify his lust to an unearthly being? Thankfully, Ava somehow knew that he wouldn't have climbed the waterfall on his own accord, but didn't want to know the details. Probably knowing how easily they could be manipulated by the spirit and how powerless they were in her hands would make Ava more aware of exactly how fragile their lives were at the moment. They held onto each other hugging tightly. For a long time they remained like that and then slowly turned back towards the site. Both had run out of words to express anything.

It was late afternoon when Noraini reached home. She knew that her two older children would have been back from school while the youngest one was still with her neighbor who used to baby sit her sometimes. She had bought some *mee goreng* for lunch, since it was already too late to cook anything for them.

She was grateful to Ava for the 100 Ringgit that she stuffed in her hand when Noraini was leaving the clinic. She was very reluctant to take the money, but Ava had insisted saying that the amount of time she had been spending with them was definitely affecting her food business—seeing how she wouldn't have had any time to cook or to lay out her shop.

On the way back, Noraini stopped at the jetty where the fishermen had brought back fresh catch from the sea and bought some fish for dinner. Entering her house she found her middle daughter Zarina, who was around eight sitting and doing her homework on the floor of the hall. The house had a musty damp smell and felt unusually cold. It also seemed to be slightly darker than usual.

*It must be because I was out in the sun so long, that the house was feeling dark and cold.* Concluded Noraini.

“*Mana kakak kamu?*” (Where is your sister?) Noraini asked her daughter.

“*Dia tak sihat, pasaltu rehat dalam bilik.*” (She is not well and so is resting inside) answered Zarina.

Hope she didn't catch a cold, worried Noraini.

Her eldest daughter Zuleha was around fourteen years old, but was quite matured for her age. She had a loving and sweet nature, which made her immensely popular with both her friends and relatives. She was a great help to Noraini and was ever ready to take care of the younger sisters or help her mother with the food stall whenever she was needed.

Noraini decided to let her daughter sleep for some more time while she went to wash up and get lunch ready. As she started to set the table, Noraini asked her younger daughter to call Zuleha. However, it took the little girl several minutes before she came back announcing that her sister refused to get up. In fact she complained that Zuleha apparently didn't even respond to her.

Noraini walked to the room anxiously, praying that Zuleha was not seriously ill.

The room was unusually dark and cold in spite of the windows being tightly shut. The air inside the room felt stuffy as if it lacked oxygen. However, the moment Noraini entered the room she was hit by a strong fishy smell—almost like a stench of rotten fish.

*Oh no!* Thought Noraini dismayed. *I hope they didn't cheat me and give me rotten fish instead of fresh ones. But why am I smelling it now? In this room?* Needless to say, she had no answer to that.

Zuleha's bed was right at the corner of the room adjacent to the window. Noraini sat beside her daughter on the bed and touched her forehead. It felt really cool. Noraini was sure that Zuleha didn't have fever, but she couldn't understand why Zuleha refused to wake up.

"Zuleha," she called. "*cepat bangun.*" (get up fast) "*makan akan sejuk.*" (Food is getting cold)

There was no response, although Noraini could hear Zuleha's even breathing of a deep sleep. She shook Zuleha by her shoulders—trying to wake her up. With every failed attempt, Noraini started to get more frantic.

When after trying several times she couldn't wake Zuleha up, Noraini stopped attempting and just sat beside the bed staring at her daughter's face—trying to work out an explanation in her mind. She was bewildered and contemplated calling someone to help her take Zuleha to the doctor.

While she sat there worrying, suddenly Zuleha's eyes flew wide open. But strangely, they were not Zuleha's eyes. They were completely black; the pupils had dilated till the whites were totally invisible. Zuleha looked at her with a smile so bane, so spiteful that it could never be a human's. In spite of the terrible fear that overtook Noraini, she rushed to the door and bolted it from inside to prevent the other children from coming in to see the horror or get harmed in any way.

Her eldest daughter's face had twisted and contorted adding a hundred years worth of wrinkles to her young and smooth skin. There were blue veins running like cobwebs under the greenish white skin. The stench that emanated from her daughter repulsed Noraini almost making her gag.

She shrank back; shocked, feeling a bolt of fear rushing through her.

"Noraini," cried a rasping voice—a voice that was completely different from Zuleha's sweet melodious voice although it originated from her mouth. "Are you trying to get rid of me?" The lifeless voice asked; as Zuleha slowly stood up on the bed—an imaginary bunch of strings seemed to operate her like a puppet.

"Do you think you are strong enough? Do you think any mortal is strong enough?" the voice screamed and burst out into a sinister laughter that echoed throughout the room.

Looking towards Zuleha's face Noraini was suddenly taken aback; she couldn't believe her eyes. A greenish brown hand with long bony fingers was hanging out of Zuleha's mouth. Noraini was completely paralyzed, she couldn't move an inch and stared helplessly at her daughter while another hand started coming out of her mouth. Slowly, while Noraini gaped in horror, the entire ghoul climbed out of her mouth. Zuleha just seemed to be a lifeless shell from which the soul had long disappeared.

Grinning at Noraini—enjoying the effect on her, evil spirit squatted in front of her; sitting face to face. Its onyx black eyes sparkled with the fire of vengeance; Noraini felt like the rage within the eyes were almost burning her.

"Go ahead," it continued. "Try it! And die trying." it laughed louder making Noraini close her ears.

Suddenly she felt a strong gust of wind and her daughter's legs seemed to buckle under pressure that made her head hit the pillow. Noraini was speechless; she sat rooted to a spot. She had never come across a spirit so powerful that it defied all her known beliefs.

Shortly Zuleha woke up, complaining of a headache. Noraini hugged her frail body tightly praying to God to end the misery soon.

PAEL KHUGAN

## Chapter 14

On the other side of the island the jungles were dark and dense; the hills rose higher into the sky. The peaks were almost always hidden by low lying clouds lending an aura of anonymity to the whole region. There were no streetlights, no shops, no houses or any other signs of human inhabitation around. The morose area waited forlornly for human visitation, but the islanders seemed to have forgotten completely about that area.

There was a road that ran through the forests there. It was in urgent need of repair—the tarmac from most parts had eroded creating deep potholes that were dangerous at nights. This road ended in an abrupt dead end inside the woods. From there ran a muddy, narrow path winding up the hills. No vehicle would have been able to travel through this road. The only possible way was to walk along—or at the most ride a bicycle. But rarely was there anybody traversing that part of the island.

In fact, there were only two reasons for any islander to take the path; to bury the dead—since that was where the island's only burial ground was located, or to visit the *bomoh*.

In the entire island there was only one woman they would all go to during times of trouble—their belief in her powers uncontested. None really knew when exactly she had migrated to the island or how old she was. But nobody cared or bothered enough to find out.

For as long as people could remember—even the elders of the island included, she had always been living on the hills in her small cottage. She was referred to as *mak cik* (auntie) by everybody who knew her and everybody who had heard of her.

She was *the* medicine woman of Ayu. People of Ayu both feared her and respected her, though fear almost outweighed the respect. In fact, they prayed that they would never need *mak cik's* help. After all, her help was only needed in dire circumstances; when lives were in danger, either from unknown sicknesses, or charms or vengeful spirits. And needless to say, no one wanted to fall under any of the three categories.

*Mak cik's* small thatch roofed wooden cottage stood right on the hills on the other side of the burial ground. The tombstones creating a morbid view from her tiny raised wooden patio. Inside was a single cabin. On one side was a narrow wooden bed and shelves holding her limited material belongings and a few old yellowed photographs. The people in the pictures appeared blurry and indistinguishable; although, under close scrutiny, the photographs showed signs of being taken way before world war two.

The other side of the cabin was a rough kitchen area that held a few pots and pans. The rest of the place was filled with all kinds of jars, bottles, talismans and other nick knacks that she required as items pertaining to her profession. There were preserved bat wings, soil from graveyards, candles—some burnt, some not, and assorted colored potions with diverse uses.

*Mak cik* had been taking a short nap in the middle of the afternoon, when a knock on the door woke her up. Not used to many visitors she walked towards the door wondering who it could be and was really surprised to see Noraini there. She knew Noraini made it a

point to stay away from anyone or anything that had anything to do with her late mother's profession. *Mak cik* knew it better than anybody else in the village because it was she herself who had taught Noraini's mother everything she had known in her lifetime. When the time came for Noraini to study the powers under her, Noraini refused. Although Noraini had the potential of making a good *bomoh*, after her mother's death she gave up even talking about the art, leave alone practicing it. *Mak cik* too did not push her. She knew how badly the conditions of her mother's death had troubled Noraini.

*Mak cik* had known Noraini from the time she was six months old. When her mother visited *mak cik* during the days she was learning the arts, Noraini used to accompany her sometimes. The little girl with a ready smile and inquisitive eyes had always stirred some corner of *mak cik's* heart that she didn't know existed. So, even when Noraini stopped visiting her, she always kept an eye out for her and prayed for her well being. Seeing her standing at her doorstep, *mak cik* knew that something must be really wrong for Noraini to come to her cottage.

The concerned look on *mak cik's* face broke Noraini's resolve to remain strong and she burst into tears—the horrors of the last few days finally catching up with her. *Mak cik* quietly hugged her and brought her inside the cabin and got her a cup of water. Noraini looked at her gratefully and after draining the cup, in between sobs and sniffles she related the whole story to her. Relating the part where the spirit had actually possessed her daughter's body, Noraini's eyes filled up with fresh tears.

*Mak cik* patted her arms asking her not to worry. After that she closed her eyes and muttered a few words under her breath—a rush of cold breeze blew through the cabin toppling a cup that came crashing down a ledge. After opening her eyes, *mak cik* informed Noraini that the doctor and his wife were in grave danger. There was not a moment to lose.

"*Bawa dia sini cepat.*" (Bring them here fast) she said looking austere towards Noraini.

Noraini thanked her and was going to rush out of the cottage when *mak cik* stopped her. She put something inside Noraini's palm. Noraini saw that it was some kind of a root of an unknown, jungle plant. *Mak cik* instructed her to bury it in front of her house saying that would keep her children safe. Noraini was overcome with gratitude. She hugged the old lady and thanked her—her eyes overwhelmed with the relief she felt, knowing that whatever happened, at least her children will be safe.

She hurried off promising *mak cik* that she would bring the doctor and his wife there before sundown. She practically ran down the narrow path to the end of the road where Faizal was waiting in the jeep leisurely smoking a cigarette. Noraini, panting breathlessly after the brisk and long walk, related to Faizal everything that took place in *mak cik's* house. She urged Faizal to hurry for they needed to bring back the doctor and his wife as soon as possible.

Faizal dropped Noraini off at her place first. Noraini. She wanted to bury the root before she took part in any ritual that involved the evil entity that had almost killed her and her daughter. After dropping her, Faizal he sped off towards the site to update Arul and Ava of the challenge that lay ahead of them.

Both Ava and Arul were in a state of shock from the incidence at the waterfall. Silently, Ava had cleaned Arul's bleeding hands and feet and used gauge bandages around the wounds. She didn't ask Arul for any explanation, and Arul caught within the web of his guilt and trauma couldn't offer any.

Faizal came back with the news that Noraini had already met *mak cik* and she was expecting them.

"Of course," added Faizal doubtfully, looking at Arul's bandaged foot, "I am not sure whether boss is fit enough because quite a major part of the journey would be by foot."

"I am fine," replied a grim Arul. "Let's get this over and done with."

Arul after what he had gone through over the last few days—in fact the last few weeks was reluctant to waste any more time.

They picked up Noraini from her house and the four of them drove towards *mak cik's* cottage. Throughout the journey there was no conversation in the vehicle—each of them lost in their own thoughts. Both Ava and Arul were so nervous that they didn't have any inclination towards any sort of chit chat; picking up on those vibes, Faizal and Noraini too remained silent all the way.

The jeep had to be parked at the end of the broken down road. Faizal informed Arul, that the rest of the way had to be covered by foot. It was getting dark; the twilight sky had turned a deep shade of purple with strokes of mauve and orange mixed into it.

They had to walk through the graveyard in order to reach the cottage. At certain parts, the path became so narrow that they had to walk in a single file. Arul sometimes being the last one in the group due to his painful feet had a very uneasy feeling of being followed by someone. However, every time he looked over his shoulders, there was nobody. All around, the deathly white gravestones stood like silent witnesses to their trial.

Ava's throat felt drier than parchment paper. She kept her view strictly on the path and avoided looking towards any other side. But in spite of that she could see a shadow following them from the corner of her eyes.

It wasn't as if the shadow was walking along with them. It just seemed to appear at sudden intervals. Standing at odd points, like behind gravestones or behind tree trunks. Right at the centre of the graveyard was a huge banyan tree that seemed to conquer the entire area. Its huge branches spread out on all the sides like the arms of a demon waiting to clutch and squeeze the lives out of the innocents. The adventitious roots hanging downwards from its branches was like the hair of the mighty demon that covered its vicious face.

Ava thought she saw a figure hanging upside down and swinging from one of the branches. However, it was visible just for a moment and vanished so fast that she couldn't understand whether it was actually there or she had conjured it up due to her fear.

Throughout the way, Ava prayed to God to give them the strength to fight the battle for their survival. After walking for almost fifteen minutes they reached their destination; those fifteen minutes felt like a lifetime to both Arul and Ava.

The first thing that struck Ava when she first saw *mak cik*, was her eyes. It was like the eyes of a young girl in the wrinkled face of a hundred years old woman. It had a gleam of sharpness, of intelligence and of power. Below the eyes there were deep dark shadows so

distinct that it looked as if she had very liberally applied kohl beneath her lower eyelids. The rest of her looked like an old woman, with innumerable wrinkles on her narrow face; a slim frame covered in a blue kaftan that looked more like a flowing robe and almost drowned her entire body. She had wispy, grey, thinning hair and walked with a slight stoop. She smiled reassuringly showing a few remaining decaying teeth—the rest of them had probably been sacrificed at the altar of old age.

“*Masuk.*” she greeted them in Malay, gesturing them to enter. But when they climbed the steps to her porch, she held out her hand and asked them to stop. Then, looking beyond Arul’s shoulder, her eyes narrowed. She seemed to be staring at something that was invisible to the rest of the group but was very clear only to her eyes.

“You are not welcome inside.” she announced in perfect English to some unseen entity. Ava could feel a shiver run up her spine; she knew then, that she had not been imagining the shadowy figure.

Asking them to wait outside, *mak cik* turned around and went inside to get something. She came back with a white powder. “It’s salt.” she explained. “This will keep her out.” No one knew how to respond to that piece of information.

She created a boundary on her doorstep and asked them to come in.

Arul gave her a bleak smile and along with everyone else, followed her into the cabin. After settling down on a straw mat in the middle of the cabin, everyone’s face turned towards Arul expecting him to take the lead and relate the whole story to *mak cik*. Arul told her everything, interrupted from time to time by *mak cik* when she needed specific details. By the time he finished narrating, it was almost dark inside the cottage and he could barely make out everybody’s face.

*Mak cik* got up and lighted candles which she placed around the cabin. Outside the cabin was inky black. The crickets and the croaking frogs filled up the air with their off tune symphony. At intervals, the howling of wild dogs and piercing bird calls joined the orchestra. The entire environment was creepy; spooky. Ava reached for Arul’s hand and squeezed it tightly feeling lost in such a surreal surrounding; he gave her a reassuring squeeze back, to wordlessly tell her that everything will be all right.

*Mak cik* started to speak. “The spirit you have brought along with you is very strong. She died in your hands before any of her dreams in this life could be fulfilled. She holds you personally responsible not only for her death, but also the misery that her family and loved ones are going through due to her untimely demise.

“The entity Noraini exorcised,” she continued, looking towards Noraini, “was the spirit of the owner’s late wife, and not the one that is causing all these troubles. In fact, the spirit of that lady was protecting you all this while. Her spirit guarded the house and made sure that the evil spirit couldn’t harm you. However, I feel, after she crossed over, this vengeful presence has become more powerful and feels unstoppable. She is really bent on revenge and feels that only by killing you, will she be able to ever get released from her ties to this world.”

“But it was not really my fault that she died. I couldn’t have saved her even if I had tried.” cried Arul desperately. “It was the fault of the anesthetist.”

*Mak cik* held up her hands asking Arul to stop.

“It was you who had promised her that she would live. It was you who told her that she would see her boyfriend after the operation was over. And most of all, it was you who

held the knife that cut her. So do you blame her for thinking you are the one responsible for her death? *Mak cik* asked wryly.

“No!!” Ava wailed. “Please help us. Please do something. I cannot live without Arul, please...” She started sobbing hysterically

Arul took her in his arms, trying to calm her down. “It’s ok. I am sure *mak cik* can help us.” he said looking towards *mak cik* pleadingly.

“I can help you, but you have to do exactly as I say.” said *mak cik* after a slight pause.

“Oh yes,” said Ava tearfully. “We are prepared to do whatever you say.”

*Mak cik* then explained to them that since the spirit was of a virgin girl, her powers were very strong and she had proven it by following them across the seas. Strangely, whatever she had been doing to Ava had just been diversions; she had not intended to harm anyone else. Her one and only aim had always been Arul and she had focused all her powers with the sole intention of hurting Arul. That had made her strength more potent.

Since she had already attempted to kill Arul twice, the third one would be the most dangerous and she would do everything within her capacity to harm him.

“She is waiting to harm Arul at the right time.” informed *mak cik*.

“But when is the right time?” asked Ava in a shaky voice.

“Tonight!” *mak cik* announced dramatically. “Tonight is new moon.” She continued after a pause. “Her powers would be at its peak tonight and she is going to make her biggest attempt on your life exactly at midnight.” she said looking at Arul.

Arul felt his body turning to ice—his hands and legs growing numb. He opened his mouth trying to talk, but there were no words that could escape his mouth.

“We have to exorcise her spirit through a ritual, sharp at midnight tonight.” declared *mak cik*. “But we need something that belonged to her, in order to complete this ritual. Without that it will not be possible to get rid of her completely.”

“But where will we find something that belonged to her?” asked a panicking Ava.

*Mak cik* closed her eyes and took a deep breath, while everyone else in the cabin held their breath. After a moment, she opened them and blew out her breath softly.

“There is something that belongs to her that you are holding—something that is very personal; something that is providing her with the power to remain in this world and destroy you.”

Ava glanced at Arul’s face questioningly. “Is there anything of hers that you are holding?” she whispered.

Arul shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He couldn’t imagine having something personal of one of his patients. It is not as if he collected hair brushes of his patients or anything like that.

He was dismayed and realized that if there was nothing of hers that they could get for the exorcism, he may die that night.

“Isn’t there any other way that you could perform the ritual? Because I am sure I am not holding any of her personal belongings—not even a prescription or a hospital form.” declared Arul.

Before anyone could reply, Noraini interrupted. “I know that at this moment, you may not remember, but if *mak cik* says that you have something of hers, it must be true.”

“Yes,” said Faizal agreeing. “She has never been wrong before. Please sir, try and think harder.”

Arul was amazed at the faith both of them had in the old lady. He felt both better and worse for it at the same time. Better, because he saw a glimmer of hope that she would be able to save him and worse because he knew that he didn’t have any of her possessions, at least not on the island—perhaps there was something in their house in Mumbai, he thought doubtfully. But now he understood that without it, his life was in jeopardy.

Once again the room fell silent. Time was running out—the clock ticking towards the last few hours of Arul’s life. Ava could feel a huge wave of despair and despondency wash over her. She sighed putting her head down staring, at her gold bangles trying to wrack her brains.

Looking at the bangles, she had a sense of *déjà vu*; her mind was trying to tell her something, but the message was so deeply embedded in her subconscious that she couldn’t extract it. There was a fleeting memory of something important, something that may hold the key to the entire event, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

Arul was thinking with the desperation of someone who knows that he may not see the next sunrise. *What could he be having that belongs to her?* He wondered.

He closed his eyes trying to play the entire scenario of the night when Mridula died. Her face, her pain, the surgery, her lifeless body, everything ran through his mind in a kaleidoscope of images. He remembered being alone with her after everyone else had left the room; he remembered the needle of the saline bottle that remained inserted into her unmoving arm; he remembered seeing her tag, the tag that announced her identity. He recalled how it had come out in his hand—his hand which was still drenched in her blood. He remembered how he held the tag smudging it with her blood. He felt that he was coming very close to a solution; he felt that he could see the light on the other side of the tunnel. He could feel a growing sense of excitement and started breathing faster. *Yes! He remembered. He had put the tag in his pocket.*

“I know what it is.” Arul almost shouted; his face shining in the candle light with an air of exhilaration.

Everyone looked at his face in anticipation.

“The tag. I kept her hospital tag in my pocket. It was covered with her blood. It must still be there in the pocket.” said Arul triumphantly speaking fast since his speech had trouble keeping up with the speed of his thoughts.

“If only we can find the pair of trousers I was wearing that night, I think we will be able to find the tag.” he added energetically.

Everybody in the room saw the glimmer of hope; all started talking at once.

*Mak cik’s* firm and low voice silenced them all. She explained to them what had to be done.

“You must go to the house and bring back the tag. I will have to make a doll which after saying the different incantations, we would have to burn along with the tag. Only then will she be forced to leave this world. But remember,” she warned. “It won’t be easy. She will try everything to stop you in your mission. I can already see the storm that she is bringing in from the sea.”

Looking out of the window, everyone could see the dark thunder clouds that had covered the entire island. The lightning bolts were still far away, but the wind had picked up speed slowly and now was blowing with a faint whistling sound.

“Here is a blessed piece of *kemayan*.” said *mak cik* giving it to Ava. “Burn it when you enter the house, the smell will keep her away; but it will only burn for half an hour. You must find what you are looking for in that time. If not, she will try to kill you there itself. I can feel her powers increasing as the storm is coming closer and midnight is approaching.” she added ominously. “Go. Go now.” she commanded. “We are running out of time. Noraini will stay back and help me get all the things ready for the ritual.

Arul, Ava and Faizal ran out of the cottage and hurried towards the jeep. That is when the storm picked up; the trees in the graveyard swayed—creaking and moaning like animals in pain. Ava thought she heard the same cackling laughter she heard at the house the other night and started shivering with cold and fright. Thankfully Faizal was carrying a small flash light, but that could barely penetrate the darkness that swallowed up the entire region. It was as if someone had poured melted tar over the area.

Arul thought he heard whispers in the air—something threatening him, something menacing, but he couldn’t make out the words. The pain in his feet started to get worse; he tripped over numerous graves, and almost fell; but every time Ava stopped him from hitting the ground and pulled him up. In spite of all the trouble Arul still looked up to the sky and thanked God for blessing him with such a compassionate and understanding wife.

The wind grew so strong that they could hardly move forward. The dry leaves and dust were flying around in whirls, making it difficult for them to see anything; they had to grope around with their hands—almost losing their way several times. Luckily Faizal knew the way very well, so before they could get completely lost, he was able to get back on the right path.

By the time they reached the jeep, it was pouring rain; they were completely soaked through. Ava felt as wet as a fish. The incessant gale made her so cold that she didn’t think she would ever be able to feel warm again.

After they were safely in the jeep, Faizal turned the key; all of them were secretly worried that the jeep won’t start, but when it did at the first attempt, the three of them gave a sigh of relief and started towards the house.

That night Faizal drove the jeep like a man possessed, every curve, every turning was taken almost at full speed. The heavy rain had made the roads so slippery that if brakes were applied hard anywhere, there was a possibility for the vehicle to skid off the road. Thankfully they were in a brand new four-wheel drive that had just been bought for the Managing Director of the company for those times when he needed to visit the site. Seeing how the logging site was right inside the forest, they had to buy one that had good grip even in the most slippery paths.

In the pouring rain, visibility was almost zero. The wipers were working as fast as they could, but they were not able to keep the rain away from the windscreen at all.

Ava could feel her whole body rigid with tension. She tried not to think about their previous night’s accident. Closing her eyes, and curling her palms into fists so tight that she could feel her nails digging deep into her palms, she tried to take deep breaths to relax herself. Every screech the tires made at every turn drove her to frenzy. Luckily,

with every breath, as she inhaled the new-car smell, she was reminded that they were safer in the new jeep compared to the old one that had been damaged badly in the previous day's accident.

The wailing wind seemed to follow them throughout their drive. The trees creaked and bent almost to the ground under the pressure of the wind and she could hear scraping sounds on the roof of the jeep when it went through low branches.

To add more trouble, the moment they took the final curve that went towards their house, a huge cedar tree uprooted, and crashed barely ten feet away from them; across the road. A mournful creak, ending in a final deafening thud, blocked the way to the house completely. Faizal applied the brakes with all his might and the jeep came to a shuddering stop just about two feet from the uprooted tree. If he had been unable to stop the jeep in the nick of time and was a moment late, the vehicle, along with its three passengers would have been crushed under the heavy weight of the trunk.

Ava was almost thrown out of the back seat with a jerk. All the three of them were in a state of shock—their breaths coming in short gasps. Outside the vehicle, the storm raged stronger than ever. Arul realized with dismay that now they would have to walk for the rest of the distance. He glanced at his watch. 9.45 it said; time was running out. There was no time to contemplate. He glanced at Ava and saw her eyes full of fear. All the three of them looked at each other, and without speaking a word, understood what had to be done.

Ava was worried about the *kemayan* she was carrying, if it got wet, and refused to burn in the house, there will be trouble. She grabbed the plastic off the new seat on which she was sitting, and wrapped it up. Then she stuffed it deep into her jeans pocket feeling better at being able to solve at least one tiny problem.

Without a further word, all the three of them got out of the vehicle and clambered over the tree trunk that had fallen flat on the road. After crossing the first hurdle they ran towards the house in the heavy rain as fast as they could. The iron gates at the beginning of the driveway was opening and closing making sharp creaking sounds that to Ava sounded very similar to the cackling laughter that she had been hearing so often now.

Arul's feet were excruciatingly painful; he could feel them swollen at places, but he knew there was no time for self pity at that moment. He would have lots of time to feel sorry for himself once the night ended successfully.

By the time they reached the front door, all the three were soaking wet once again. Before Arul could open the door Ava stopped him.

"We must light the *kemayan* first." she said her voice shaking with fear.

"Do you have a box of matches?" Arul asked Faizal since he was the only one who smoked.

Faizal fumbled through his pockets and came up with a box. But with a sinking heart Arul realized that it was completely wet and wouldn't be able to catch fire.

"What are we going to do now?" Ava asked almost hysterically.

"We don't have the time." said Arul gloomily. "We have to go in without the *kemayan*. Perhaps we can light it in the kitchen."

Ava knew that he was right and so without wasting anymore time they opened the door and went inside.

The pungent smell of a decomposing body hit them hard. They could hardly breathe. The interior of the house felt as cold as a freezer and Ava could see vapors coming out of her nostrils and mouth with every breath. For a moment all of them stood stuck to the ground—as if there was a secret conspiracy going on to make them forget their mission.

It was Faizal who reacted first. “Madam I think we should light the kemayan first. Do you remember where the matches are?” he asked Ava gently.

Ava nodded afraid to open her mouth.

“Hurry then.” he said urgently.

Not wanting to be left back, or go alone anywhere, all the three of them rushed to the kitchen and Ava took out a box of matches.

It was impossible to ignore the subtle signs of the unseen presence that was following them. The switching off of the lights, one by one. The quiet sounds of the anklet getting closer and then moving farther away, the moving shadow that could only be visible from the corner of their eyes. Every second they spent in the house, was a second instigating their dark fate. When they lit the *kemayan* without any further problem, Arul let out a sigh of relief when the smoke of the burning *kemayan* finally started filling up the air..

“Let’s go and look for the trousers now.” said Arul urgently beckoning them to follow him.

They clambered up the stairs and reached the master bedroom. Ava carried the *kemayan*, putting it on a plate first. Making sure it stay burning and emanated the holy smoke wherever they went.

“Do you remember which trousers you were wearing on the night of the operation?” Ava asked Arul.

Arul shook his head and dismayingly Ava realized that, that meant a longer search.

She quickly opened Arul’s cupboard and asked even Faizal to join them in their search. “Quick,” she said. “Just go through every pocket till you find the tag.”

For the next fifteen minutes they searched through every pocket. When they ran out of trousers, they went through Arul’s shirt pockets and even his jeans, although he never wore them to work.

But unluckily, there was nothing. With every minute, Ava got more and more desperate, she was almost willing the tag to be there somewhere—anywhere. She started searching in unlikely places like bureaus and bedside cabinets just begging the universe for it to be there.

Arul on the other hand seemed to be preparing for the disaster that he would have to accept if they couldn’t find the tag. His whole body started to feel heavy; he could feel the fatigue encompassing him—a strange lethargy making his movements slow, uncoordinated. He almost didn’t care anymore. If she wanted him, let her have his life. He just couldn’t bear a single more moment of this physical and mental agony. He could feel his head spinning and knew that he was coming down with a fever.

Ava by then was rummaging through every drawer—every shelf in his cupboard. She looked desperate, yet determined. Arul wanted to ask her to just drop the whole thing; it didn’t matter, he would lose his life that night without a doubt. The spirit would have her revenge. But he didn’t have the energy to talk.

Suddenly Ava stopped searching through a cupboard midway. Her hands started to shake. In the remotest corner of her mind, a memory seemed to be peeping out. She had a vague memory of seeing the tag somewhere, but in that state of distress, her mind was not

working fast enough for her to remember the place. With perhaps the grace of God, all at once, like a bolt of lightning the image flashed through her mind.

She remembered doing the laundry for the first time within the first few days of their arrival to the island. While she had been putting one of Arul's trousers inside the washing machine, she had come across some loose change, a few notes and some small pieces of paper and something that *could* have been the infamous tag. She remembered putting it on the shelf in the laundry room. She realized, that it must still be there because, the first place in the house that she had started feeling uncomfortable was the laundry room.

Without a single word, she ran out of the room and down the stairs almost flying down them—her feet barely touching the steps.

Seeing her run like that Arul and Faizal followed. Ava rushed through the kitchen and kicked open the door of the laundry room. In the darkness of the room, she could hear an angry hiss that was clearly asking her to keep out; but she didn't care. She quickly switched on the light and reached for the top shelf.

Once she had the tag in her hand, she looked up to see Arul standing in front of her with a ray of hope in his eyes.

The tag had shrunk with the blood that was smudged on it. The neatly typed letters on it were hardly visible and were only seen through a thin film of dried brown blood.

Ava was suddenly filled with a terrible sense of loss and remorse. Holding the tag in her hand, she felt for the first time the agony of the spirit. A living, breathing young girl, who died before any of her dreams were fulfilled. It was real—she had been real; a girl who laughed and cried and fell in love, just like Ava did. It was her blood that soaked the tag. Ava could feel a wave of depression wash over her and her eyes filled with tears.

"Hurry." she heard Arul saying urgently. "We have to get out of here fast and reach *mak cik's* place. Time is running out...."

## Chapter 15

The ride back to *mak cik's* was an agonizing journey for everyone. There were too many questions that seemed to have no answer. Could the spirit be stopped? Would it try to kill them on their journey back? Was *mak cik* ready for the ritual?

Though none of them opened their mouth and voiced their doubts aloud, the terrible misgivings tormented their soul all through the drive.

When Faizal finally stopped the jeep at the end of the broken down road near *mak cik's* place, Arul looked at the clock on the dashboard; 11.09, it showed. The silent green digits on the clock screamed louder than the voices of a hundred people that in exactly fifty one minutes, his fate will be decided one way or the other.

For the first time Arul wondered how the terminally ill patients handled the news of their approaching death. How very easily, how mechanically, he had announced to numerous patients about their leukemia or their inoperable brain tumors in the past. Of course he had tried to say it with the right amount of regret and respect portrayed on his face, but once he left the room, he didn't really give it a second thought. Perhaps that was what had made him an expert surgeon—if he started to feel the pain of every patient, he may not have been able to save the ones that could be saved.

But that night he was not thinking about the ones he saved. He was thinking about the ones that he couldn't.

*How did they feel to learn about their impending death? Did their heart beat as erratically as his was beating? Were they in denial? Were they defiant in the face of death? Or were they simply as scared of the unknown as he was at that moment?* He wondered, filled with a sense of remorse.

He didn't realize when Faizal had switched off the engine and jolted out of his stupor when he felt Ava's hand on his shoulder.

"We have to get down," she tried to say it as gently as she could, feeling sorry for him. "It's quite a distance to walk."

Without a word Arul got down from the jeep followed by Ava. Faizal was already waiting outside with his flashlight.

The rain had finally stopped, but the ground was wet—almost soggy. It was pitch black and Arul could hardly make out the shapes of the others. The wind had died down and there was a certain stillness in the air. *As if nature was holding her breath—curious to know his looming destiny;* thought Arul sardonically.

The potholes on the road were filled with water making them barely visible under the tiny beam of the flashlight. Ava slipped her hand through Arul's and the three of them started their journey back to *mak cik's* cottage through the graveyard.

Ava carried the tag in her pocket; almost every minute she patted it to make sure that it was still there. She was unsure what to expect at any moment on the way; the journey

back from the house had been fairly uneventful, but somehow deep in her heart she was sure that it was far from over.

Before long they came to the graveyard. The iron gates lay broken on the sides, along with the crumbling brick walls that had vines and roots of trees long dead and chopped off running through. The walls were probably standing, creating a boundary around the cemetery a hundred years ago.

*Why do they have iron gates in graveyards everywhere?* Wondered Ava.

She had always assumed that it was to keep out grave robbers from digging up the graves for jewelry or other valuables, but now she was not sure whether that was the real reason. *Perhaps more than keeping out people, the gates were there to keep the dead in.* Thought Ava with a shudder.

She looked at Arul who was hobbling in front of her, trying to walk properly in spite of the terrible pain in his legs. Every step he took revealed his solemn determination of battling against all odds. That gave Ava a thin ray of confidence that no matter what, Arul would not give up his life without fighting for it; he would not give into the horrors that lurked in the horizon.

They had been walking in a single file because the path was too narrow for the three of them to walk together. Faizal was in front leading the way, Arul was in the middle because Ava wanted to keep an eye on him due to his slow gait and she was the last in the line.

Suddenly, the whole area was enveloped in a thick white mist. Ava halted abruptly, afraid that she may miss her way; she could hardly see her own hands or legs. She felt like she was standing in the middle of a cloud—a white opaqueness that shrouded the whole area.

“Hello?” she shouted uncertainly. “Arul, Faizal, can you hear me?”

She heard a muffled voice that sounded like Faizal’s, asking her to follow straight; but after walking almost blindly for five minutes when she still didn’t bump into Arul or Faizal, Ava started to panic.

“Hey guys, could you please wait for me? Let me catch up with you first and then you can start walking.” shouted Ava, breathless from her brisk walk and long speech.

However this time there was no answer; she couldn’t hear Faizal or Arul’s voice. She screamed again—almost insane with fear, as hysteria poured slowly into her every scream, but she couldn’t stop herself. She could hear her voice gradually starting to break and her throat hurt terribly.

Ava realized that it was hopeless to keep shouting. She halted and looked around her surroundings trying to get a familiar sight that she hoped would get her back on the trail.

Suddenly, from where she stood she could see a figure sitting on top of a grave hardly at a distance of ten, twelve feet. In spite of everything being invisible in the thick fog, the figure was as clear to her as daylight.

It was covered in a white flowing robe with a hood. The figure sensed that Ava had seen it and slowly raised its head—its eyes meeting Ava’s in a ghastly glare. The face, hideous, with mottled purplish veins running through the bleached white cheeks and forehead, was beyond the horror that a human mind could construct. Its malicious grin showed a row of teeth that were more like fangs than human teeth. Its eyes were just empty sockets filled with a kind of darkness that hypnotized Ava. She couldn’t move. Slowly the figure floated up to Ava.

Drawling in a hoarse whisper it said, “If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead by now; but I have nothing against you. It is your husband that I am after and I will have him, come what may. You cannot stop me no matter what you do.”

Ava was spellbound with fear and stayed rooted to the spot. She gazed on in horror as the hideous figure transformed into a lovely girl in her late teens, early twenties. She was so beautiful. Her sparkling black eyes were filled with so much sadness, so much pain that it felt like a physical blow that struck Ava; she could almost sense the girl’s sufferings as her own.

The girl continued speaking while Ava started at her in wonder.

“He has wronged me and I will have my revenge. Nothing will stop me, so the best thing for you is to go away and let me have what I want.”

Slowly she floated closer towards Ava smiling softly. Looking straight at Ava, she reached out her hand.

To her utter dismay, Ava found herself reaching for the tag with the intention of handing it over to the girl. She tried to stop herself, but it was impossible; it was as if her mind had lost all its power over her hand and she felt her right hand grasp the tag in the pocket. Ava knew that if she gave up the tag, it would be equal to giving up Arul’s life, but she was powerless to do otherwise.

Ava squeezed her eyes shut and started to pray to Goddess Kali. A born Hindu, she had always prayed to the Goddess from the time she was a young girl; but never before had she prayed so fervently. She asked for strength—strength to save her husband, strength to fight this evil spirit, strength to survive the night. She knew that if anybody could save her then, it would only be God and her prayers.

Little by little she could feel that she was getting back the control of her hand; her palm was still curled around the tag in her pocket, but she realized that she didn’t feel forced to take it out. Miraculously, she felt a sudden courage; she felt she could stand up against the entity. For the first time since it all began, she was not afraid. She knew that God was going to protect her.

Slowly Ava opened her eyes. The figure had vanished and more surprisingly there was no trace of the thick fog as well. All the gravestones were suddenly more visible than she would have preferred them to be. She could faintly hear Arul’s voice calling her frantically with Faizal also following suit.

She turned around and could see both their shapes a little farther.

“I am here! I am here!” Shouted Ava relieved. “Wait there I am coming. I can see you”. She ran through the graveyard ducking and avoiding the gravestones and reached Arul and Faizal.

“I am sorry.” she said out of breath. “I had lost my way in the mist.”  
“What mist?” asked Arul puzzled. “There was no mist. We just turned around and saw you had disappeared and for the last fifteen minutes we are trying to find you.”

“But I...”

“We really have to hurry. It is almost time for the ritual.” Faizal interrupted urgently before Ava could explain anything.

Looking at his watch Arul observed that it was twenty five minutes to midnight. Without any further words, he held Ava's hand and all the three hurried over to *mak cik's* cottage that could be seen at a distance.

The things required for the ritual were already gathered in trays and kept in front of the cottage. There were joss sticks, white flowers that emanated a strong heady fragrance, small bottles of perfume oils, tobacco, and different types of roots and barks of trees that Arul had never seen before. A large amount *kemayan* was burning in small earthen plates around the area--its translucent smoke causing a mystical aura in the surroundings.

They reached just in time to see Noraini helping *mak cik* bring out a life-size doll made of jute and straw. *Mak cik* was dressed in a black robe with a purple sash tied around her waist. Around her head, she had tied a black scarf leaving only her face and hands as the visible parts of her body.

Huge flaming torches made by cloth dipped in petrol burnt. In the glow of their amber yellow *mak cik* looked strange, formidable. That surprisingly gave Arul an assurance that if anybody could save him from the horror, it would only be her.

Pointing at a couple of shovels lying on one side she asked Faizal to dig a shallow grave.

"Here, let me help you." said Arul picking up a shovel.

Faizal shook his head. "It is okay boss, I can do it. The ground is quite wet and it wouldn't be very difficult to dig. Besides," he added, "You really need to rest for a while. You have gone through quite an adventure already."

Within a few minutes Faizal had managed to dig a shallow grave. *Mak cik* with the help of Noraini laid the doll inside the grave and asked everybody to sit down around it. Ava and Arul sat on one side while the opposite side was occupied by Faizal and Noraini.

After everybody had settled down in their places, *mak cik* explained the ritual to them..

"I am going to invoke the spirit here in our midst. Once she is here, I will try to get her into this straw doll and then burn it. While the doll is on fire, you," she said pointing towards Ava, "must throw the tag in. That way we will cut off her bond to this world and she won't have anything to hold her back."

"But remember," *mak cik* added ominously after a pause. "In the course of the ritual she may try numerous ways to threaten us, to plead with us or any other way to just stop us in our mission. You all have to be very strong willed. Your resolve should be unfaltering. You should not hesitate when I ask you to do something; and most important of all, you should not be frightened. Once the spirit feels your fear, it becomes stronger. Your fear feeds it with the energy it requires to manifest its powers."

"Keep in mind," she continued grimly looking towards Noraini and Faizal, "till now it was only after Ava and Arul. But now, it would not hesitate to harm you just to get us to stop the ritual. So no matter what, we have to complete the ritual. If we stop it half way due to any reason, it will kill us all instantly."

All the four of them were quite shaken up by *mak cik's* speech, but nobody said a word.

*Mak cik* started circling the shallow grave while chanting softly under her breath. Every few moments, she sprinkled perfumed oil and the white flowers on the straw doll.

Ava felt like she was in the midst of a terrible nightmare. The straw doll seemed to be almost moving at its own accord. She knew, it was impossible. She knew that observing it through the smoke of the *kemayan* was what was creating the false illusion of the doll moving. Yet, the fear she felt was not an illusion. It was there, encompassing her like an avalanche.

It was such a surreal situation—darkness covered the entire region, there was no sign of any living things around except the five of them and midnight was approaching

For a split second, Ava started to doubt the whole ritual. *What if they don't succeed? What if the spirit truly kills Arul? She had not told anybody how she had come across it a while back.*

She didn't want to scare Arul, but now she was doubtful of her earlier decision. Perhaps she should have told *mak cik* about her ghostly encounter. Probably knowing that, would have changed certain things in the ritual. With dismay she realized that there was no time to tell anybody—her watch showed that it was ten minutes to midnight.

Out of nowhere, wispy dark forms came out crawling; surrounding them from different sides. Although they crawled on their scraggly hands and legs, there was nothing human about them, nothing that claimed that they were God's creatures. Some of them were crawling out of the earth, some from under the graves. Within a couple of minutes there were almost a dozen of those creatures around.

Their eyes were the color of burning coal; the hairless heads were large and disproportionate on their skeletal bodies. One that was staring directly at Ava broke into a nasty grin exhibiting grimy brown teeth that looked like it had just finished eating raw meat. The blood was still fresh on its dagger-like teeth and was dripping down its chin. Some of the creatures had crawled up on the headstones of the graves and were sitting on them in monkey-like postures.

*They look as if they are going to spring upon us at any moment.* Thought Ava terrified.

Their gaunt bodies were covered in muddy brownish slime that Ava realized with dismay, was actually stale blood. Their scrawny hands were extended out towards the group as if they were waiting for the right moment to grab at them. Ava's eyes opened wide with shock, she was definitely not prepared for this.

Looking around Ava knew that everybody else in the group were also at a loss; everybody tried their best to keep their fear at bay. With a sinking heart Ava understood that she was not as strong as she used to think she was. She could feel fear slowly creeping in, engulfing her, suffocating her, enslaving her to its powers. She could slowly feel her resolve melting; she did not dare turn around and see how many other such creatures would be surrounding her from behind. She could feel her body turning cold.

Abruptly, she heard *mak cik's* low voice addressing her and Arul.

"The creatures you see are demons from hell. They have never lived on this earth and are not human spirits; they are here to take Mridula's spirit to the infernal fires of hell. By refusing to crossover when her time was up, by conjuring up wrath, anger and a war of vengeance, Mridula has defied the laws of God. She doesn't have a place in heaven. Moreover, she being the spirit of a virgin girl is much sought after by these demons from hell. At the end of the ritual these ghouls will carry her spirit away for her to face eternal damnation. But don't think for one moment that these creatures will not harm you. Even though they are here for the exorcised spirit, if any of you weaken mentally at any

moment, or give in to fear, they are going to pounce on you and tear away at your body like a pack of wolves.”

After warning everybody, *Mak cik* returned once again to her chanting.

Ava didn't have a clue how to handle her fear—all she knew was that she couldn't think of anything more that could go wrong. In her mind she started praying to goddess Kali to help her tide over this night of a living nightmare. Gradually once again, she felt her fear reducing its strong grasp on her. Looking at her watch she saw that it was midnight.

When she looked up, she saw the spirit of Mridula standing behind Faizal who was sitting opposite her on the other side of the grave. This time she did not look frightening or threatening—she looked almost human, except for the pale bloodless pallor of her skin.

She was wearing the same white robe that Ava had seen her wearing a while back. But this time her head was not covered by the hood. Her long flowing hair was blowing in the slight breeze along with the white robe. Ava saw her slowly glide and stand right in front of Faizal, facing him.

“Hello Faizal,” she said in a chilling voice while her head cocked to one side. “You are a very helpful person aren't you? It's so difficult to find sincere people like you in this world anymore. But tell me,” she added in a mocking tone. “Is it worth dying for this selfish man who took the life of an innocent girl? Is it worth risking the life of your wife Miriam or any of your three children?”

Faizal calmly closed his eyes and started reciting a silent prayer, not heeding the words of apparition.

“Get up Faizal! Go from here! Save yourself and your family before I bring my entire wrath on them, GO NOW! If you don't believe me, ask Noraini. She will tell you how terrible it is to face my wrath.”

Ava was amazed to see Faizal sitting in the same place, not frazzled by what was happening to him; he was still reciting the same silent prayers—determined, confident. With amazement Ava realized that Faizal's faith in his God was uncontested as no ordinary man could sit still in spite of those threats the way he was sitting.

However, by then Mridula's spirit, who was not getting any response from Faizal, had already moved on to her next victim. A ghoulish smirk lighted up her face as she confronted Noraini.

“Hellooooooooooooo Noraini.” she said. “How is my Zuleha? Her insides were so sweet that night—it took all my self-control to stop me from ripping her intestines apart. I am so lonely,” she said with a dramatic pout. “Maybe I will take her with me or maybe Zarina. She is younger and sweeter.”

Laughing at her own cruel joke the spirit threw back her head and cackled loudly--a sound that to Ava felt like a sharp physical stab of a knife to her ears.

Noraini was helpless for a second—her first instinct was to get up and run home to her daughters. A sudden stare from *mak cik* relinquished all thoughts from Noraini's head and she bent her head down and started chanting something softly.

“Go home Noraini.” Mridula's spirit commanded. “You think a piece of root is going to save your children?”

Seeing no reaction from Noraini the spirit got desperate. “Fine!” she said. “I will take your daughters to meet their grandma, all because of you Noraini.” she added pointing a bony finger towards Noraini.

Nothing had prepared Ava for what she saw then—in fact nobody including *mak cik* expected it. Noraini slowly opened her eyes and with a sly smile started chanting something loudly. As she chanted the verses, Mridula’s spirit started to go into violent seizures and her ghostly figure writhed in agony. Hearing the verses, even the hellish ghouls seemed to move further away from the ritual site. Mridula’s figure started fading into a translucent mist.

“Stop!” said *mak cik* looking towards Noraini. “If she disappears now it will leave the ritual incomplete.

Noraini realized her mistake and put her head down. In that few seconds, the spirit had moved closer to Arul. With dismay, Ava realized that the spirit was crying.

“Please,” she begged. “Don’t let me go with these demons. I promise to leave you alone. Please doctor,” she said looking towards Arul. “Save me from these scary monsters; don’t kill me twice. I promise you that I will leave this place and go away; I will never bother you again. Please stop this rite—only you can save me now.” She looked at Arul pleadingly, singling him out in the whole crowd.

Arul looked at *mak cik* hesitatingly.

“Don’t listen to her.” warned *mak cik*. “That is just a deceptive ploy to deter you. Don’t feel pity for her for even a second. For that one second will be enough for her to snap your neck from your body.”

That shook Arul out of any grain of pity that he had felt for the spirit a moment back.

Hearing *mak cik*’s ruthless voice, the specter turned her head towards her, hissing angrily—her nostrils flared, her eyes burning with anger, with hatred.

“We are at the last part our ritual.” announced *mak cik* without paying any attention to the apparition. She started to chant the verses louder and faster trying to drown the wailing voice of the crying spirit.

The demons started to howl concurrently as if taunting the spirit’s cry of anguish. Their voices were sharp screeches that were more painful to the ears than the scratching of fingernails on a tin sheet. The entire atmosphere echoed with the spooky surreal sounds of the supernatural beings.

Eventually *mak cik* stopped circling around the grave and stood near the head of the straw doll in the grave. She poured a liquid into the grave and then lighted it with one of the flaming torches. At that second, Mridula’s spirit vanished with a final heart wrenching wail and the straw doll caught fire instantly.

“Hurry, throw the tag in.” *Mak cik* commanded Ava.

Ava got up and put her hand inside her jeans pocket to take out the tag. But before she could do that, the blazing straw doll sat up, grabbed hold of Arul’s hands and started pulling him towards the fire. Arul started to scream in a fit of fear. Ava hurriedly bent down, grabbed his hand and tried to pull him back from the fire. But there was a supernatural strength within the straw doll that refused to let go of Arul’s hand.

Noraini and Faizal rushed to help Ava pull Arul out of the burning pit.

The three of them tried to pull Arul out with all their might. Ava could see Arul's hands had already caught fire. The night sky was filled with Arul's cries of agonizing pain; in the background Ava could hear the screeching voices of the demons chanting.

At first she couldn't make out what they were saying. It sounded like "Resh mate! Resh mate!" but slowly when the words started getting clearer as the chant got louder, she could hear them clearly.

"Fresh meat! Fresh meat!"

With a shock she realized they were referring to Arul—waiting for him to burn. She didn't know whether they wanted his soul or whether they wanted to feast on his remains; either way, she didn't want to know. Ava could feel the taste of bile rising in her throat and had a strong urge to throw up.

She could hear *mak cik* commanding her urgently. "Let go of him. Ava you need to throw the tag in the fire first."

Ava was lost. She knew if she didn't throw the tag in the fire, the spirit will not leave, but she couldn't let go of Arul. *What if it actually burnt him completely? What if the demonic entities pounced on him while he was burning, and ravaged his body right in front of her eyes?*

It took every ounce of her will power; but she let go of Arul's legs that she had been grabbing earlier. Noraini and Faizal though were relentlessly trying to pull Arul out of the fire.

Ava felt like she was in a trance—her legs like lead pillars refused to budge as she dragged herself up so that she could once again reach the tag in her pocket; once she had it in her hand, she threw it in the fire with all her might. There was a heart wrenching wail that rose from the fire and seemed to be echo throughout the entire valley. The last thing she remembered was the inhuman wail intermingled with Arul's very human cries of agony. And then she passed out.

## EPILOGUE

Six months have passed. The beautiful serene *Pulau Ayu* is as lovely as always. The incident at *mak cik's* cottage had changed everyone. Their beliefs, their strengths, their weaknesses, everything had taken on new meanings.

Faizal still works for the company as the assistant cum driver. After that incident, Faizal has learnt to combat the battles of life better. He has become more pious---his faith in God unshakeable. He has taken the path to spirituality and holds gatherings with the village youths guiding them to understand the various gifts and mysteries of God. Sometimes, thinking back to those horror filled days, he shivers and really feels sorry for what happened to the good doctor.

Noraini's life has taken a more drastic turn. Understanding her true potential and the support that her mother had provided the entire island, Noraini decided to follow the same path. She knew that the path had been chosen for her by fate and she had been wrong to run away from her true calling. Having faced what she had faced, she swore that nothing like that would ever befall her loved ones or anyone else's loved ones on the island. She learnt the mystic arts from *mak cik* and is now the island's new *bomoh*. Thinking back to that terrible night, Noraini feels sorry for the doctor and wishes she could have done something sooner, something more.

Things however remains the same on the other side of the island. No one still ventures there without a need. Yet in the midst of the huge banyan trees and the graves stands a lone cottage on the hill where once lived an old woman referred to by all, as *mak cik*. The cottage still stands but for more than a month now it has been empty and the whereabouts of *mak cik* is unknown. Like all the other mysteries of her being—her birth, her arrival to the island, her family, even her disappearance now remains a mystery.

She was like an angel who had been sent from God to keep a balance of good and evil on the island. Once, Noraini learnt those same lessons, she disappeared. Perhaps Noraini is the only person who knows where *mak cik* is; however when anyone asks her of *mak cik's* whereabouts, she just smiles mysteriously and says when the island needs her she will be there.

As for Ava, she is trying to get back to a routine and normal life on the island. After what seemed to be an eternity, she has learnt to look once more at the night sky without feeling that some vengeful spirit is out there looking back at her. She can once again enter dark rooms without fear clutching at her throat; though sometimes still, when she is alone, the slightest unexplained noise reverts her back to those times of terror. Life in the island though is really a lot more serene than it had first started out to be.

However, she still misses Arul immensely. The spirit got what she was looking for. She had killed one of the most promising surgeons.

Arul is alive; but his dreams to be the best surgeon has died. He has lost his right arm to the fire that night. Even though he now has a prosthetic arm, never again will he be able to hold a scalpel. He will always be a good doctor, but never again a surgeon.

That has killed the Arul that Ava had fallen in love with. It was as if she had been married to a completely different person—the jovial, loving Arul she knew has been replaced by a dark, brooding and morose stranger. The light that always shone in his eyes was not there; as if he had stopped living and was just existing.

Besides, even his conscience has turned out to be exacting its pound of flesh on Arul's mind. Ironically, his conscience has turned out to be a more ruthless judge of his guilt. Every night at midnight he gets up screaming—the nightmares haunt him mercilessly; not a single night had passed that Arul didn't have the nightmares.

Mridula had made sure of that. She had got her revenge.

PAEL KHUGAN

## About The Author



Pael Khugan has worked as an editor, an educator and is presently the Executive Director of an international financial and corporate consultancy firm.

Writing, however, has always been her first love.

The Never Ending Nightmare is her first novel and is in the midst of being converted to a screenplay for the silver screen.

Pael lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia with her husband and their son where she is working on her next novel.