

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

GENESIS

A gripping thriller on love,
loss, destiny and resilience

THERESE PAL



Survival of the Fittest

Genesis

Therese Pal



Survival of the Fittest: Genesis

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*To Abhi, for walking beside me with love
through two decades*

*and to my parents, who walked ahead of
me, lighting the path.*

Prologue

Wayanad, India: 25 years ago

The first cry of the infant was feeble, reluctant—an unwilling declaration of her arrival into this strange, dangerous world. Minutes later, her twin brother echoed her sentiments with shallow breaths and folded fingers. Their mother lay flaccid on the table, ghostly pale and equally lost, oblivious to their arrival. Through the invisible thread that bound them, the twins had known the trials their mother had endured, had tasted the salt of her tears, and they expected nothing but the harshness of the treacherous world.

Dr. Mathew, the gifted gynaecologist at Maria Mission Hospital, was sweating profusely beneath his mask and overalls. His fear for the woman on the operating table was apparent. Her pallor had grown progressively worse, her long, elegant eyes were closed in surrender. His hands trembled as he lifted the second baby. No excitement or jubilation accompanied their birth, aside from the frenzied heartbeat of the surgeon; he alone knew the peril that waited to swallow them whole.

“Keep them safe,” Mathew whispered, handing the baby to Nurse Tina, his longtime friend and the only companion he trusted that night.

“She has lost too much blood. The vitals are not good. We need to transfer her to the medical college hospital.

We're not equipped for this," Tina said, wrapping the babies in clean towels and placing them gently in a cot.

"Yes," Mathew replied, his voice strained. "An ambulance is being prepared for the other accident patient. We will send her with him, but quietly."

His heart grew heavier as he glanced at the adjacent room. It had been a tragic day. Life and death had passed through his hands in the last few hours, and he battled the sinking feeling that more was to come.

Tina rushed to see to the transfer, leaving Mathew alone to wrap up. They were acutely short of staff due to the impending Christmas holidays.

As Mathew worked alone, his mind flashed back to the evening's startling events. It had begun with all the promise of a blissful night. The air was filled with soulful music, a Jugalbandi of Veena and Flute—forever entwined and heavenly, lifting his heart too in its soft embrace, calming his mind. It was the first day of his holiday, and he watched the travelling theatre group's latest play, "Krishna Leela", at the open ground with a feeling of contentment, a feeling that was rare to him in the recent months. The accompanying music then quickened, the Drums and Mridangam adding a sense of dramatic anticipation.

The majestic stage was charged with the presence of Kamsa, the evil king of Mathura, awaiting to kill his sister Devaki's eighth child, prophesied to end his reign, just as he had with all her previous newborns.

In the dim-lit room, Devaki's son was born. A beautiful baby with skin a dark and divine blue, akin to the darkest cloud about to pour down. He was adorned with thick black hair and big, beautiful eyes—a perfect baby. Yet, no delight, no wonder, remained on his parents' faces, only dread, a reflection of their breaking hearts, knowing the imminent fate awaiting their child.

Suddenly, the stage lighting changed; a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning filled the air, making the entire stage seem to shake. The walls collapsed and guards buckled and fell. Lord Vishnu appeared in all his glory beside the newborn, his most powerful avatar, intended to bring joy and justice to the world as prophesied, an answer to the prayers of the oppressed.

His booming voice reverberated throughout the room, commanding Vasudeva, Devaki's husband, "Take the infant away from Kamsa's eyes to the Yadava king—Nanda and his wife Yashoda, across the Yamuna River. This infant is to be called Krishna; he will grow up as their son and become the protector of all, the god of love and kindness...."

At that moment, Rajan Master, the director of the play, had hurried to Mathew with a bewildered expression. "Varkey is looking for you. He's in a rough state but wouldn't tell me anything!"

Mathew rushed out immediately. Varkey, his godfather, had been reclusive since the devastating landslide that claimed the lives of his wife and daughter during the torrential monsoon, six months ago. Mathew shuddered at

the thought of that doomed day, the pain of his own loss resurfaced, like a waking sea monster, gnawing at his heart.

Varkey was waiting alone at the far side of the ground, under the cover of the old mango trees lining the compound. The news his godfather brought knocked the ground out from under his feet. He clung to a tree trunk for support, staring at Varkey, unseeing, as he struggled to process the information.

"I am sorry I couldn't tell you the truth earlier. I had my reasons. What we need right now is your help...Its urgent..." Varkey looked away, worry lines etched deep into his age-hardened face. Misery and sorrow darkened the hollows around his eyes, his pride lay forgotten.

Mathew knew he owed his life to his godfather, his father's lifelong friend. Their bond had endured through thick and thin. But this revelation was outrageous... Varkey knew how he had felt about her... and to let him suffer through all that agony!

He wanted to swear and scream. A lifetime of respect for his godfather choked him from inside. "What in the hell happened in the last six months?"

Before Varkey could respond, one of the actors from the play appeared, still in his elaborate costume of Putana, the demoness sent by Kamsa to kill the infant Krishna.

"There was a call for you, Dr. Mathew. An emergency at the hospital," said the actor, casting a wary glance at Varkey.

Mathew turned and saw Varkey, staring at the costumed man.

“Oh, never mind his atrocious looks. He is one of the actors, playing a demon today!” Mathew continued hurriedly. “Bring her to the hospital at once. I will wait.”

Mathew turned and rushed to the hospital, his heart a tumultuous mix of fury and relief.

Dr. Mathew gazed at the pale figure before him. How quickly fate had turned—he was on the verge of losing her once again, before he even had a moment to savour her return. The attached machines glowed ominously, displaying figures that indicated her vitals were plummeting. Fresh dread enveloped him like a hurricane. Her babies slept silently in their cot; he must keep at least one promise to her...

He moved to check on his earlier patient in the private room. The woman was still not fully awake from the sedatives. She seemed comfortable, her breathing steadied, blissfully unaware of her loss. Her decade-long struggles and hopes had once again ended in ruin.

“Cruel fates,” Mathew thought bitterly.

An SUV screeched to a halt outside the compound, directly below the room. Mathew saw harsh headlights streaming through the tiny gaps in the curtains. He peeked out cautiously. A heavy-built man emerged from the driver’s seat; his face hidden by a grey woollen balaclava. Matted, dirty long hair spilled out from under it,

cascading onto his back. His skin was ink-black, as if painted. He crept towards the back gate of the hospital.

Mathew sensed the danger before his brain processed the information; the figure was disturbingly familiar. He needed to act fast. He hurried back to the operating room and locked it from the inside. The new mother—closer to death than life—and her tiny newborns in the cot beside her were in mortal danger. He shivered under the weight of the promise he had to keep. His mind raced through the options. The hospital was thinly staffed at this hour, and an ambush was imminent.

He moved to the side room to check the doors. It held a cot with another two infants, curtains drawn shut around them. They looked so tiny in their cot, their skin having turned blue, losing the battle before it fully began, before they had a chance to bask in the love awaited them.

A memory flashed in his mind—another infant, lively and divine blue. Flashes of lightning and claps of thunder echoed in his thoughts—this time, tinged with a ray of new hope...

Part 1

"We all belong to an ancient identity. Stories are the rivers that take us there." - Frank Delaney

1. Sitayanam

Cambridge, UK: Present Day

She was all alone. The dark forest closed in around her like a suffocating shroud. Gnarled ivy twisted around ancient trees, their roots clawing at the earth beneath the high rock she perched on. Below, a lonely river snaked through deep ridges, its banks lined with jagged rocks and dense thickets. Her face was buried in her knees, arms wrapped tightly around her legs, her long hair cascading like a veil. Tears streamed down, soaking her velvet skirt and the silk shawl she clutched protectively over her belly. The encroaching darkness seeped into her very soul.

A few hours earlier, she had been surrounded by comfort and adoration. The dancing ghungroos, celebratory music, and vibrant decorations of the much-awaited homecoming now felt like a distant dream. The coronation day of the rightful heir seemed like a mirage compared to the frightening depths of the lonesome forest around her.

Born a princess, she had married an heir. On her wedding day, she had solemnly promised to be his companion for life. From that day onwards, she had followed him to the

ends of the earth, like a shadow. She hadn't left his side in sickness and in health, through the luxuries of the palace and the frugal existence of their exiled life in the forests for the past fourteen years. Her dedication did not waver, even after she was taken, confined alone in the fortress of the demon. All she ever asked in return was her husband's love. She knew he loved her, even now. But he chose to be the king first—a king without blemish, without her—the subject of accusation and gossip. He would set an example for the rulers to come for eons, to be known as the most righteous king of all, even if it meant personal sacrifices.

But by sacrificing his love, he sacrificed her life too! He had left her when she needed him the most. Where was the justice for her? Where was his justice for their unborn child, his own heir? Wasn't he supposed to be the right and just king for them too? His silence broke her heart into a thousand more pieces. Her grief knew no bounds, and she wept uncontrollably...

Jane Banks woke up abruptly, drenched in sweat, her body tense with grief. She was weeping for real, still feeling the sorrow and loneliness from that desolate place in her dream. Who was that woman? Why did she feel her misery as her own? She switched on the bedside light. A stash of sheets fallen from the bed, the script she was reading right before she fell asleep. The title embossed on the scattered pages shone in the light: Sitayanam – The Reimagined Story of Sita.

The phone which pulled her out of the nightmare went silent again on the far table. Jane blinked rapidly, trying

to shake off the lingering haze of her dream, her heart still racing. It felt so real, the desolation of the character drilling deep into her heart. She had read that script many times during rehearsals but rarely thought of the protagonist in that heart-wrenching way until that dream forced it on her. In the corner of the room, her elaborate dance costume was stacked in the overnight bag.

She peeled herself out of the dream and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Two missed calls glared from her phone; she must have been deeply asleep to miss both. The phone vibrated again in her hand, startling her. It was James, her twin brother.

“You’re not on the train yet, are you?” James’s voice was a mix of concern and exasperation.

“James, You Ok? I missed Mum’s call too!” Jane’s voice trembled slightly, betraying her anxiety. Her mind raced through possible scenarios, both plausible and far-fetched, as was her habit. The dream had intensified her dread today.

“Shouldn’t you be on the way to London already?” James chided gently.

Jane sighed, “I know, I know. I’m running late. What’s up?”

“Mum and Dad won’t be able to make it to your performance today. Something came up.”

Jane detected a hesitation in his voice, a telltale sign he was holding something back. He knew her well... too well.

“I’m coming instead. My friend Olivia is rather fond of Indian classical dance.”

Jane paused, considering. “You should stop counting on cancellations for free dates!”

“If you impress her, I’ll get a season ticket, I promise!”

“Ha! So, there’s hope for at least a season with your new friend. Good to know...” she chuckled.

“Of course.” James said plainly, refusing to be drawn into the probing. “I’ll come with you to Kent this evening if you’re still planning to stay with Mum and Dad for the weekend?”

“Okay. I must leave now if I’m to reach the theatre on time. See you this evening.” She hurried to get ready, her mind buzzing with the urgency of the hour. She had a final dress rehearsal at the venue before the performance to-night.

Jane’s studio apartment in Cambridge was scarcely furnished, clothes stacked haphazardly on the corner cupboard, her desk overflowed with books, reflecting her chaotic life. Fabrics and jewellery boxes lay scattered, remnants of her late-night costume preparations.

Jane freshened up quickly. She chose a simple white shirt, bright blue jeans, and a pair of comfortable boots and pulled her short thick black hair into a ponytail. She had a natural brilliance about her, and her large almond-shaped eyes, lined with dark kohl, were pleasant and bright.

She was looking forward to the evening, to take part as one of the support cast for the SivaLakshmi Dance Academy's show at the renowned Royal Albert Hall in London. She was eager to finally meet Siva and Lakshmi, the legendary couple who founded the Academy. Based in Florence, their Indian classical dance drama group had garnered accolades and followers for its tasteful adaptations of classics and powerful storytelling. Jane had trained at their London academy during her school days. After busy but lonely research years at the University, she seized it when an opportunity arose to join their latest production.

Jane hurried to finish packing, leaving the storage bags and jewellery boxes strewn across the floor to tidy up later. It was still raining outside. The intermittent rain had started in the night, making the late autumn leaves on the footpath squelchy and slippery. The train to London was running late; the announcer attributed the delay to unruly autumn leaves on the tracks. "That pairs well with the wrong kind of snow last winter," Jane thought ruefully.

When she reached the venue, the group of performers were already in costume, ready for the dress rehearsal.

"Hurry up, right here..." her friend Rita called out from the backstage dressing room. Rita helped Jane get into costume and makeup in record time. The vibrant colours of the costume felt at odds with the grey fog of unease that still clung to Jane after her dream. As Jane's fingers brushed over the intricate designs, she felt a connection

to her heritage that she was only now beginning to appreciate.

“You’re practically unrecognisable and look beautiful for a change!” Rita laughed, dragging her to the waiting group.

Evening descended swiftly, and the audience settled into their seats. James and Olivia sat among them, reading the synopsis from a decorated brochure: *Sitayanam*. The dance drama retells the story of Sita, daughter of Mother Earth, adopted by King Janaka, who grew up as the princess of Mithila. She married Lord Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, after he surpassed the valiant test set by her father to choose a suitable groom for his precious daughter, only to endure the trials of life and emerge as a feminine power reflecting the strength of her mother.

The lead dancer moved with elegance, her performance poignantly conveying Sita's journey. Her feet and hands created classic postures and mudras in perfect harmony. Her face beautifully reflected the emotions: the playfulness of a child, the dreams of a young woman, and the guarded optimism of a bride-to-be.

A graceful male dancer joined her, portraying Prince Rama and enacting the Swayamvara scene. They moved in unison, their synchronized movements mirroring the love and adoration between the young prince and princess, transporting the audience to a timeless scene of romance. Beautiful Gandharvas and Apsaras—the divine performers—welcomed them to their enchanting world, worthy of the gods.

The audience was captivated. James reached out and took Olivia's hand in his own. She gave him a radiant smile in return, taking in his oval face, beautifully framed by flowing hair, his thick eyelashes lining his deep black eyes. Her face was set in deep emotion, as if transported to the enchanted world, with her own prince looking at her with adoration. The depth of his intense gaze made her cheeks flush. James held her hand and gently kissed it, silently promising her his own devotion.

On stage, the play moved on to Sita's life in exile and her lonely existence. Jane waiting at the wings, thought of her dream, reliving the experience through the dancer; shards of Sita's broken heart piercing her own once again. Maybe Sita was that mirror, reflecting her own heart, and its deepest scars, still raw behind the veil. She pondered Sita's resolve to endure and fulfil her karma for her children; After all, Sita was the daughter of Mother Earth, the goddess of infinite endurance.

The audience erupted in a standing ovation at the end. The dancers held hands, bowed in unison, thanking the audience and invited guests.

Backstage, all performers were graciously welcomed by the enigmatic founders of the group. Lakshmi, with her toned, slim body and elegant features, looked every bit the timeless dancer. Siva, older with greying hair and beard, exuded an air of melancholy, as if the lines of the heart-wrenching play had etched themselves into his soul. Jane thought of her mother; she would have enjoyed their company very much.

Jane went to touch Lakshmi's feet for a customary blessing, but Lakshmi hugged her instead. "You look just like my daughter," she said quietly with a gentle smile. Jane felt an instant connection to the artist.

"Of course, with this makeup and outfits, we all could be identical siblings!" Rita quipped, drawing hearty laughter from the group.

Back at the dressing room, Jane removed her makeup hastily. "James must be waiting outside."

"Oh, why didn't you mention that earlier? I would have danced better!" Rita was fond of James just as much as Jane, having spent their childhood together. She had a crush on him during school days but had given up eventually; James never seemed keen to change their close friendship to anything else.

"He is with a date apparently!" said Jane.

"What kind of doctor is the new one then?" asked Rita, rolling her eyes

It was a standing joke between them, and Rita never missed a chance to tease him endlessly for his repeated choice of his colleagues as dates. His reasoning was simple enough. He rarely ever had time to socialise outside work. The only women he met long enough to ask on a date were either his colleagues or his patients and dating the latter was apparently illegal!

Rita tagged along with Jane to meet James. They saw him waiting at the side of the now empty main hall talking

attentively to a young woman in an elegant black dress and matching shoes. She was incredibly attractive and carried an effortless charm.

James came forward to give Jane a bear-hug and high-fived Rita as was their custom.

James beamed at Jane. "You were amazing!"

Rita turned to his pretty companion to shake hands, "I am group dancer number 33. And you are Dr.?"

"Olivia. Olivia Russel!" she looked at James in surprise.

Rita was grinning peevishly. James grimaced at her.

He put his arm around Olivia, protectively. "No, she is not my colleague, if you must know," he clarified. "She works at the Medical Research Laboratory at Cambridge. I met her at a conference few months ago."

"Oh, that is the reason I got to see you more often recently!" Jane exclaimed with a mischievous smile and greeted Olivia warmly. "Hope you enjoyed the evening?"

"That was absolutely splendid! I am utterly speechless; the performance was simply exquisite," Olivia exclaimed in admiration.

Jane smiled warmly, enveloping her in a hug, noticing how happy her brother looked with Olivia.

"Have you been roaming in royal circles now? She sounds very aristocratic to me!" Rita asked James in a muffled voice as she poked his rib discreetly. He ignored her jibe.

“Are you ready to head to Kent?” He asked Jane as they walked out together.

“Yes. What was it you weren’t telling me this morning?” Jane asked, her voice filled with sudden gravity.

James frowned slightly but nodded. “Let’s talk about it on the way.”

Jane couldn’t shake the feeling that her dream was more than just a figment of her imagination. It felt like a connection to a past she couldn’t fully understand, a past somehow intertwined with her present. The echoes of Sita’s story lingered in her mind, blending with the rhythms of her own life. She wondered if there were answers waiting for her, hidden in the pages of time.

It was midnight when James and Jane left for Kent, unaware of the intense storm gathering in their horizon...

2. The twist of fate

"I love your car. How come Mum and Dad gifted you one and not me?" Jane reclined her seat, her tone teasing.

James smirked, eyes glued on the road. "You hate driving, remember? No, I am being polite - You are a terrible driver! Besides, they helped you buy your apartment."

"I can drive fine. I couldn't say that about the parking though!"

"And who gets sick on long drives?"

"Not if I'm the one driving! I just like to hold onto something."

"Me too, when you drive... my dear life!"

Jane made a face, then settled back, glancing at him sideways. "Olivia seemed nice."

James glanced at her; eyebrows raised. Jane was a keen observer, always sizing people up. Gaining her trust was a feat few managed.

"She is nice," James said, nodding. "And yes, I do like her."

Jane smiled, understanding that was all she'd get out of him for now.

The drive to Kent was quiet, the late hour ensuring light motorway traffic. Jane, exhausted, half-closed her eyes. James, lost in thought, finally cleared his throat.

“I wanted to tell you in person. Mum hasn’t been feeling well. Her symptoms weren’t great, so I insisted she get tests. That’s why they couldn’t come to the show today.”

Jane sat up, alarmed. She had sensed something was off with her mum, though Lissy never said anything to keep her children from worrying.

“She thinks it’s cancer.”

Jane’s heart sank. Lissy Banks was their rock. Her unwavering presence and optimism had shaped Jane and James into who they were. Their father, Richard, a finance executive, was often away, leaving Lissy to anchor the family.

As they neared their parents’ house, a handsome two-story brick home at the end of a tree-lined private road, Jane felt a knot tighten in her stomach. Lights glowed warmly in the living room, and the driveway lanterns cast a comforting light.

Inside, Lissy was reading in her favourite armchair, a colourful blanket snug over her feet. She rose, her face lighting up. Short and plump, with greying hair framing her kind face, Lissy exuded warmth.

Jane hugged her tightly, fighting back tears. James joined, kissing his mother's forehead. Though they towered over her, she matched it with her love.

"How many times have we told you not to wait up this late?" James chided gently.

"I napped in the afternoon. How was your performance, Jane? I was so looking forward to it. Gutted to have missed it!"

"It was great. Met Siva and Lakshmi too... But how are you feeling, Mum? Really?"

"I'm fine, just a bit weary."

"We'll talk in the morning Mum. It's really late, you must get proper rest." James insisted.

Lissy reluctantly agreed, kissed them both goodnight before heading to her room.

Jane tossed and turned in her bed, worry gnawing at her. Anxiety wrapped around her like a suffocating fog. She finally drifted into a fitful sleep, haunted by dreams of death and demons.

The next morning, breakfast was lively. Richard, home for the weekend, was in charge, serving steaming mugs of tea, fried eggs, and bacon on toast. His receding hairline

was speckled with grey, and a faint stubble shadowed his usually clean-shaven face.

Lissy looked determined, almost cheerful. "I got my test results yesterday. The initial diagnosis was correct—it's breast cancer," she said matter-of-factly.

Jane and James hugged her tightly. Jane wiped her tears, trying to stay strong.

James asked about the treatment options while Jane clung to her mother, warding off dark thoughts. Lissy was their protector, who kept the demons at bay, and her presence itself always had a calming effect on her.

"Don't worry, it's early stage and treatable. I recognized it early," Lissy reassured them.

"But there's something you should know. My mother died of breast cancer as she was diagnosed too late. My grandmother also died young; no one knew the cause, medical facilities were scarce then," Lissy said gravely.

James caught on. "You think it's hereditary?"

"Yes. I've checked with my doctor." Turning to Jane, she added, "You should get tested to see if you're at risk."

"Why worry about it from now? I'll face it if it comes," Jane said flatly.

“There are preventive measures you could take,” James urged.

“I’ll think about it,” she replied noncommittally. The nightmare of cancer loomed over her, staring at her mother, possibly eyeing her too. She shook her head to clear the thoughts.

“James has a new girlfriend,” Jane announced suddenly. “Someone outside his usual bubble!”

Lissy and Richard looked at James with interest. He was known for having no serious girlfriends, always blaming his busy schedule.

“Olivia is lovely. It’s early days though. And Jane, stop using me as a diversion,” James said, smirking. “What about you? Found anyone good enough, or are all men still vain and imperfect?”

Jane scowled at him and busied herself clearing the table. She carried the plates to the sink, away from any potential conversation about her own life.

She thought about the crowded but lonely halls from her Cambridge days. She thought of Steve Chang, a passionate political researcher and outspoken activist. His fervent speeches about global injustices had captivated her, his unwavering commitment to the cause stirring something deep within her soul. She remembered the heartache she felt when he made the decision to return to

Hong Kong to join the movement he believed in so fiercely. To him, his calling lay not within the pages of textbooks or the hallowed halls of academia, but in the gritty reality of activism on the ground; His profound anguish for his people overshadowing any comfort or hope for a bright future.

As she grappled with her own feelings of rejection and despair, Jane sought solace in the boundless expanse of the cosmos, immersing herself in the study of physics. The vastness of the universe provided a welcome distraction from the pain of her fruitless affection, offering a sense of perspective that brought her some measure of calm again. Finding the insignificance of humans and their irrational feelings in the vastness of the universe was oddly comforting!

She couldn't shake the feeling of *déjà vu*, the feeling of emptiness and rejection left as remnants from the dream. 'I'm in a select-few club!' she thought wryly as she washed her hands. 'How many could claim they were spurned for a philosophical rival such as one of true public duty! Maybe Sita was one of the first, and I have felt her predicament all my life without even knowing her!'

She gazed into the window glass without seeing. A silhouette of a weeping woman, an embodiment of despair and abandonment remained stamped in her mind, her silent whisper clearly in her ears - "Where is the justice for me and our unborn child?". A sudden gust of wind rattled the glass, making her shiver involuntarily.

3. An unforeseen storm

A week later, James called Jane again, urging her to take the test. Reluctantly, she complied, if only to get him off her back. Another two weeks passed before she was asked to meet the doctor in person. Jane felt a knot in her stomach as she trudged through the rain to the grey office. The consultant, an older woman who resembled her grandmother, greeted her with a quiet, whispery voice, barely audible over the din of the medical equipment in the background.

"Please, take a seat, Jane. I'm Dr. Rosin Jones. First, the good news: you are not more likely to get cancer than any other young woman of your age."

She also sounded like her grandmother!

"Then why not just say that over the phone?" Jane asked, her voice edged with apprehension.

"The thing is..." Dr. Jones hesitated, her eyes intent on Jane's face. "Your DNA doesn't match your mother's."

Jane felt the world tilt. She had braced herself for one deadly disease or the other, but never this...

"What do you mean? That's got to be a mistake!"

"We checked it... twice."

Blood drained from Jane's face. Her lungs tightened, making it hard to breathe. She felt an unfamiliar tension in her chest and a churning in her stomach.

Dr. Jones handed her a glass of water. "Drink this. Take deep breaths. It's just the shock."

Jane obeyed, her hands trembling. The foundation of her identity seemed to crumble beneath her feet. How does one navigate such a revelation? She felt adrift in an endless ocean with no oars or anchor, her thoughts whirling and clattering in her brain. Sobs threatened to escape her.

"You could take another test with fresh samples. Also talk to your family. There might be an explanation," Dr. Jones suggested gently.

Eventually, Jane's anxiety settled into a steady ache, allowing her to speak.

"Yes, I'll do that." She stood, shook the doctor's hand, and left. Her steps were unsteady, her vision hazy. She sat on the steps of the sheltered passage, staring blankly at the pattering rain on the pavement.

After what seemed like ages, her methodical mind kicked in. 'Mum wouldn't know about this; she was the one who asked me to take the test. Neither would James or Dad. They both were there. It must be a sample mismatch. Yes, that's it... James would know for sure!'

She called him. He picked up on the first ring.

"I was just about to call you. Did you get your result?"

"I did. But I need to talk to you in person."

"Is everything alright?" Concern edged his voice.

“Just some technical things. I need your help to clear them up.”

“Okay, come over. Right now.”

When she arrived at the apartment James shared with a friend, he was reading on his laptop. The place was unusually tidy for two busy young doctors. Jane knew that was James’s doing.

James looked puzzled by her sombre mood. Jane grabbed a bottle of water from his fridge, fidgeting. Finally, she decided to mimic Dr. Jones’s approach and pulled out the stack of papers.

“The good news is, I have no higher chances of getting cancer,” she said with a forced smile.

James looked relieved, but Jane’s heart ached. She felt a great love for her brother but also a pang of dread—what if she were to lose that link too? She quickly chided herself— ‘It’s not blood that makes us close, it’s our shared soul.’

“But there’s something confusing. My genetic record doesn’t match Mum’s,” she said quietly. “Maybe it’s a sample mistake, but I wanted to check with you before talking to Mum and Dad.”

James frowned, scanning the papers. Finding no mistakes, he grabbed his work laptop and started typing furiously for reference data.

Jane watched him silently. Shared mannerisms, like the way James screwed up his face in concentration right then, reassured her of their bond. They were too alike—same black, almond-shaped eyes, same olive skin tone, even though much paler than their Mum’s rich brown. But their features resembled their mother’s, or so she thought until now.

When she looked up, James was watching her solemnly, probably reaching to the same conclusion.

“Maybe it’s a sample mix-up, but let’s do another test to be sure,” he said. “It might take longer through the usual route, but Olivia has access to test facilities for her research. Let’s get a sample to her.”

Jane agreed, relieved at the quick turnaround plan. James called Olivia, who agreed to help.

“I’ll get fresh samples from Mum and Dad. I don’t want them to worry until we know more,” Jane said.

James gathered at-home blood collection kits, took their samples, and labelled them correctly. He handed a kit to Jane to collect samples from their parents, so she could take them all to Olivia in Cambridge.

“I’ll meet you there tomorrow evening. We’ll see Olivia together once she’s had time to do the tests, okay?” James said.

Jane nodded, feeling relieved he would be with her, no matter the outcome.

Late evening found James and Jane arriving at the research centre where Olivia worked. Darkness had fallen, and November's sleet and gusty wind followed them inside. They signed the visitor register and asked to see Dr. Olivia Russel. She appeared a few minutes later, her step light despite the serious expression on her face.

"We have brought a storm for you," James said, shaking off his drenched coat. He pecked on her cheek lightly while keeping her at arm's length to save her from the wet clothes.

She led them to the top-floor cafeteria, warm and filled with the inviting aroma of fresh coffee.

Olivia fetched them hot mugs of coffee, scones, and cakes. A few sips brought colour back to their cheeks.

"You know my brother well; the way to his heart is definitely through his stomach," Jane said, watching James's contentment as he munched on a scone.

James smiled, embracing Olivia warmly, now that he was dry and content. He was charming and intense at the same time and pulled her to him to kiss her passionately. Colour warmed her cheek as she returned his kiss tenderly with a shy smile.

Olivia's face turned serious when she looked at Jane.

"You managed to run the test then?" Jane asked noticing it.

“Yes. First things first, your genes match, so you are indeed full siblings. However, Dr. Jones was correct about your parentage; neither of your parents’ DNA matches yours,” Olivia said quietly, aware of the graveness of her pronouncement.

Silence fell in the room suddenly. The wind shrieked outside, splattering rain on the wide glass windows. A lonely, leafless weeping willow swayed incessantly in the middle of the wet lawn. Thunder echoed in their hearts. The coffee remained forgotten; the cold had seeped into their souls as well.

Epilogue

"She walked out as if from the sun itself, her eyes reflected the fiery blaze, testament to the steely resolve she held, fiercer than the 'Agni Pariksha'- the trial by fire, they demanded of her, as if her purity could be any less than the wild-fire burned within her. It was ignited on the day she was abandoned, in the loneliest of places, on her weakest physical condition, in the most fragile state of mind. There, it had set hold of her, to protect her unborn child, the very essence of existence and survival known to the living beings. It burned on, through the day her twin sons were born, the rightful princes, but in the meagre setting of an Ashram, through the testing and tiring days of single parenting, through the intense education to make them the men they ought to be, men of great strength and integrity. And it had intensified to an all-consuming blaze, on the day she met him again, the king of all kings. She wasn't any more a weak woman he had abandoned for the sake of his own kingdom, but a force, emboldened by a life of self-determination, flanked by her brave, regal sons at her side. She had gone through the fire many times in the decade passed, coming victorious every time.

The majestic king was most remorseful, forever broken hearted, still bound by the rule of law he thought above anything else.

"I did not have a choice. For I am the king, who should lead by example. I could only sacrifice what belonged to

me, and not the integrity of my country, of which I was born to lead. That was my destiny; written for me from the genesis..."

"You always had the choice my Lord... You always had... You could have left all that for me, the way I left my world to go with you to the end of the world for long fourteen years, being your trusted shadow in rich and poor. You had once left it for the honour of your father's oath, you could have left it once more for the oath you made to me on the day you married me." Tears mellowed the fire, but the embers still glowed. "You could always have thrown away the rule book you have made for yourself.... You could have left this world of power for me... You could have loved me... the way I loved you..."

She turned away and embraced her sons for a final time. She blessed them with the all the goodness that came from a selfless, sacred motherhood, to last for an eternity. She knew her karma was fulfilled here. It was time for her to embrace her own mother, of immeasurable source of solace, forever loving and caring. After all, she was the daughter of Mother Earth, the goddess of infinite endurance...

Jane woke up with a start, dropping the envelop from the seat. The plane cruised over the clouds, homebound. Annie smiled at her from the scattered photos on the floor, young and vivacious, still unaware of any fire or fury.

.... The End...

Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude to Abhi, my first reader who started the book with all the scepticism in the world but ended up unable to put it down until 3 a.m. to finish the last chapter. That alone gave me the first true hope that this story might live beyond my desk.

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References

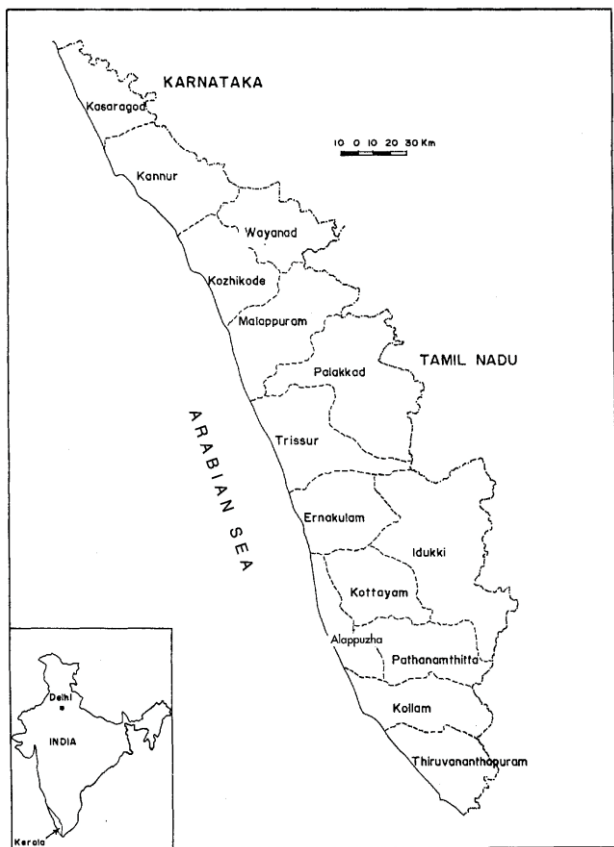
This story draws upon a wide range of cultural, literary, and scientific sources that have shaped its themes of love, legacy, and identity. Among them:

- **The Mahabharata** – attributed to Vyasa, the epic of duty, love, and fate, whose timeless lessons echo through generations.
- **The Ramayana** – Valmiki’s epic of exile, devotion, and moral struggle, resonating with the choices of family and destiny.
- **The Bible (Genesis, Exodus)** – as a meditation on origins, promised land, inheritance, and the search for truth.
- **A Survey of Kerala History (A. Sreedhara Menon)**- influential book on Kerala history comprehensively covering the geography and history of Kerala.
- **Sushruta Samhita (Sage Sushruta)** - an ancient Sanskrit text from 600 BC of Indian medicine and surgery that systematically details surgical techniques, medical knowledge, and Ayurvedic principles.
- **Annie (Thomas Meehan)**- The hopeful spirit of Annie that can help you overcome any challenge, no matter how difficult your circumstances may be.
- **Indulekha (O. Chandu Menon)** – Depicting pioneering Women characters from 19th century Kerala who dared to choose love over forced family traditions.
- **Vadakkan Pattu** – the Northern Ballads of Kerala, oral traditions celebrating valor, betrayal, and the bonds of kinship.

- **Chemmeen (Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai)** – a Malayalam classic weaving love, superstition, and the rhythms of Kerala's coastal life.
- **Aswamedham, Thulabharam, Ningalenne Communistakki (Thoppil Bhasi)** – books and plays that brought social movement to the forefront in 20th century Kerala, with KPAC and Alleppey theatres pioneering the field.
- **Malabar Stories (Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and others)** – tales of Kerala's landscapes, humour, and humanity that capture the pulse of everyday lives.
- **Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity & the Cosmological Constant** – inspiration from science and the search for universal truths.
- **Indian Nobel Laureates in Literature & Science** – from **Rabindranath Tagore's** poetic works to **C.V. Raman's** scientific discoveries, symbolize the depth of Indian thought across disciplines.
- **Kerala's literacy movement** – a pioneering social initiative that mobilized communities and government support to achieve near-universal literacy, making it the first fully literate state in India by the early 1990s.
- **India IT industry Vision** – began in 70's and 80s, driven by Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, Dr. Raja Ramanna, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Narayana Murthy and supported by Indira Gandhi's government.
- **First democratically elected Communist government in the world** – formed on April 5, 1957, in Kerala India by Communist Party of India (CPI) with E. M. S. Namboodiripad as the Chief Minister.
- **Omanathinkal Kidavo – (Irayimman Thampi)** -a lullaby with vivid imagery composed in 19th century, expressing mother's deep love and affection.

- 'Nityaṃ tu mama mānase sarvasmin kṣetravartini' - Sanskrit verse translate to: 'You are in my heart always, present in every part of my being!'

Map of Kerala –For illustration only



Jane's Sketch on Palari

