

PART I

Chapter-1

The young girl sitting in the waiting room of Dr. Kulkarni's clinic was an epitome of patience. In her hands was a rosary. The silver beads sparkled as they caught the afternoon sun. She let them slide over her fingers, movement elegant, with every chant, her lips moved, not missing a breath. The receptionist inquired with her if she wanted tea or coffee, which the girl politely turned down. Her name was Tania Rana. She was the step-sister of Sonya Rana, a Bollywood super-star. Tania was highly protective about her elder sister. She was studying in Canada but whenever she was in India, she made it a point to accompany Sonya everywhere, even to her sessions with Therapist, Dr. Kulkarni. Today Sonya's session had spilled over an hour but Tania had not moved from her seat.

The consulting room of Dr. Kulkarni was cheerful and well lit. Sky blue wall paper formed the backdrop for his desk. His patients spent many moments gazing at the intricate design of clouds and birds depicted on the wall paper. The color blue symbolized calm and the birds reminded them of freely letting themselves go. It helped sooth their frayed nerves, the doctor had observed. He had let it stay in spite of its tattered ends.

“Is it not normal to think about dying all the time?” This came from Sonya Rana, highly successful and on the top of her career.

Sonya sat on the couch, cross-legged, chewing her nails in anticipation. Next to her was a tissue box. With every sentence she plucked a tissue, to wipe her tears or blow her nose in to.

“Why do I have this strong urge to die, doc?” Sonya's blue eyes mirrored fear and anxiety, noted Dr. Kulkarni.

Sonya appeared helpless, almost at the point of breaking. She clenched and unclenched her fingers, tears threatened to spill from her bloodshot eyes.

“What accompanies that urge?” Dr. Kulkarni probed further, appearing calm and composed at this revelation.

“I get scared. I am scared of the darkness, the loneliness! I am afraid of myself, afraid that I might end up hurting myself. My thoughts are going to kill me someday, doc!” Sonya implored, her eyes wide with fear. She sat huddled on the couch, rocking as if the rhythm would somehow comfort her mind.

“You want to live. Remember that! You got to override these thoughts and replace them with happy thoughts. Don’t be alone for long with suicidal thoughts rolling in your head. Step out of the house. I am sure you will feel safe in crowd and much distracted too. Or simply call someone you can talk to.” His voice was comforting.

Sonya nodded her head as if she understood what the doctor said.

“Nothing is ever enough?” Dr. Kulkarni let his question hang in there, looking pointedly at Sonya. From the previous sessions he had observed that Sonya was a workaholic. She had the capacity to drive herself to extremes. Insecurity, perhaps. He played with the thought.

“Never... never enough. How can it be doctor? You want me to stop trying?” Sonya asked plucking a fresh tissue from the box.

“You are one of the top movie stars today, highest paid actor, riding high on your career... how do you rate your success?” Dr. Kulkarni glanced at his Tab feeding in the details.

“If I stop, I stop forever... if I stop, I stop forever.” Sonya began fidgeting with the ends of her scarf, murmuring the same words again and again. At one point she had gotten up and began pacing, then sat down staring vacantly ahead.

“Sonya, you got to learn to stop... somewhere. You are simply pressurizing yourself.” Dr. Kulkarni wanted to know if what he

said made sense to her. He was simultaneously going through their past sessions and saw that Sonya had not progressed much. He twiddled his thumb wondering what more he could do for her.

“Your mother, Ramola says you are not sleeping well. Also, last session you promised, you will cut down on alcohol.” Dr. Kulkarni expected Sonya to lose her temper, like she had during their previous sessions, ranting and screaming, but surprisingly she was calm.

Sonya swiped at the tears in her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “Doc, you are the only person I am honest with, about my feelings, my thoughts, after Jay.” Dr. Kulkarni noticed a twinkle in her eyes at the mention of Jay’s name but her eyes clouded soon enough.

Sonya glanced out the window. It was the beginning of spring. There was hope, a transformation waiting to happen but Sonya felt herself drifting away, not able to be a part of it. Her mind seemed to be weighed down with random thoughts. It was pulling her down. Nowadays, she rarely smiled, Sonya wondered with a frown.

“Sonya, how are things between you and Jay?” Dr. Kulkarni’s voice brought her out of her musings.

“Absolutely wonderful. I am in happy space with Jay!” Sonya perked up, fake smile drew on her lips.

Doctor looked at her pointedly then sighed. “Why don’t we do a little exercise here? Change your priorities. For the next few days think about yourself and Jay! The relationship you share with him, work on it. I want you to put the happiness quotient back in your life, Sonya.”

Sonya closed her eyes and nodded her head. The next moment she broke down. Dr. Kulkarni waited, giving her space to collect herself. He was trying to fathom the many emotions that came tumbling out at every session.

“Doc... I feel at times my life is slipping out my hands!” Sonya, tear-struck, helpless, stared at her palms.

“Sonya, think about your career... your relationships... think about Jay. Think about the success you have savored till now. Has that been easy?” Dr. Kulkarni had not moved from his chair. Why did he have this weird feeling that Sonya was hiding something from him?

Sonya was now sobbing. She blew her nose hard in one of the tissues. Sonya always felt at ease here. It was one of her usual sessions with the doctor. She was meeting Dr. Kulkarni for over a year now. The room had minimal furniture; nothing too overbearing. It was a spacious room with windows opening out to the garden below. Soft breeze rustled the curtains. Sonya looked out the window and sighed. The next question reined in her strayed mind.

“Tell me something about your childhood.” Dr. Kulkarni glanced over at his notes.

“Doc, we have spoken about it in my last session. There is nothing more to add.” Sonya grimly replied. Suddenly the defenses were up. Anger claiming her calm demeanor.

“I want to go through it once more.” Dr. Kulkarni was confident the roots to her depressed state of mind lay in her childhood and Sonya was definitely hiding something. He prodded her further.

Let us go back to your childhood. Dr. Kulkarni noticed the look of disconcertion cross her face. Last session, she had become edgy and refused to answer. Dr. Kulkarni knew he had to push, if need arises.

Sonya bit her lip, agitation evident, she avoided eye contact. Dr. Kulkarni did not give up. Few minutes later, from the looks of it, she had made peace with the fact that she had to tell him the truth.

“Can’t hide anything from you, can I?” Sonya asked in tone of surrender.

Dr. Kulkarni chose not to answer but simply leaned back, curious to hear. If Sonya revealed the things she had held back for so long, he would be able to help her, he was thinking.

“It was nearing evening. Our little bungalow in New Jersey was dressed in fairy lights. My step-mom had given birth to a baby-girl. My nanny was telling me about the baby, how cute she was and how we had the same nose and eyes. I liked the fact that we had something in common.” Happiness flickered on her face but was soon enough swallowed by the darkness that had begun creeping in to her eyes.

Dr. Kulkarni encouraged her to speak, so she started, “One day, I was dressing up my doll when my step-mom’s brother, Vikram walked in. I did...” Sonya faltered here, rubbing her arms together, fighting hard with the memories which were until now locked away in dark recess of her mind. She looked at Dr. Kulkarni for comfort. He nodded his head, assuring her to go on.

“He always pulled me close, nuzzled my neck and even kissed me on my cheeks. It appeared normal when he did this in front of dad and step-mum but when alone... it was different... bad!” Sonya’s lips twitched, a slight tremble in her fingers did not go unnoticed by Dr. Kulkarni.

Sonya was finding it difficult to speak. The words formed in her mind, came to her lips and just stayed there. She glanced out the window looking for some sort of encouragement. Far below she could hear sounds of vehicles plying the streets. A hawker’s voice streamed in through the sixth floor window as he called out to people, drawing their attention to his wares. Sonya gulped, took off her scarf and rubbed her palms together. It was a normal day outside, she thought.

Dr. Kulkarni watched the level of anxiety rise in Sonya. He did not want to interrupt. Finally after what seemed like agonizing blank minutes, Sonya began.

“He touched me all over... kissed me on my lips, pulled me by my hair and made me do things...” Sonya shut her eyes, her head resting on the back of the couch she sat on, her fists clenched.

“You did not confide about this to anyone in the house? What about your father?” Dr. Kulkarni asked horrified.

“Who would believe an eight-year old?. They said I was a story-teller out to seek attention. Step-mum was very angry and ignored me, stopped caring for me. I spent most of my time alone on the swing in our backyard or holed up in my room. My mum had abandoned me when I was only a baby. I was scared. I did not want to be alone... all over again!” Dr. Kulkarni noted tremble in her voice here.

‘Emotional dependency and Insecurity’, Dr. Kulkarni typed in the words in analysis column.

“I feared losing my little sister... my dad... I apologized... I was let off with a warning... welcomed back into the fold,” Sonya sighed. Her face in her hands. She stayed like that for a while. When she looked up, her eyes were swollen.

Dr. Kulkarni walked up to her and offered a glass of water and patted her hand. What torture a Eight-year old had to go through and no one to speak to? Dr. Kulkarni sighed at the thought of it.

“When did the abuse stop?” Dr. Kulkarni’s question made her turn towards him. Her blue eyes reflected horror and pain.

“Do they ever stop?” Sonya hugged herself. “I grew up, grew up wise. I learned to avoid him, make him go away.”

“Just how did you do that young lady?” Dr. Kulkarni quizzed her. Sonya was a brave girl, a fighter but that spirit had somehow vanished. This too went in the analysis column.

A smile spread across her lips as Sonya stared ahead. “I found a hiding place. It was a huge carton in our attic. It belonged to my mum. It had her clothes stacked in them from her theatre days. At first I was afraid of the darkness but later got used to it.” Sonya’s expressions had hardened.

“I could hear Vikram... in his hoarse voice... calling my name. He would look for me... open all doors... I could hear his voice, hear the doors open and shut. He would ask Tania but she never gave me away. You know she had found out about my hiding place. It was a secret we sisters shared.” Sonya’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Initially it was scary but then it turned into a little adventure... a game of hide and seek... me and Tania enjoyed it immensely. We derived pleasure by outwitting him at his own game.” Dr. Kulkarni noted glee in her words as Sonya narrated experiences from her childhood which she had pushed in the far corners of her mind.

Dr. Kulkarni observed Sonya’s face would break into a smile at the mention of Tania and the times spent together.

“Sometimes I was not that lucky. He would have his way around with me. One day, Tania saw him doing bad things to me. That’s the way she described it to dad and he was shocked. He called me over and asked me if it was true and for a moment I was tempted to say ‘yes’ but I denied.” Sonya sighed, wrapped the scarf around her head, hiding the gorgeous locks beneath.

“Did your father believe you?” Dr. Kulkarni noted Sonya appeared relaxed since last one hour.

“Who would believe an eight year old? But next whenever Vikram came visiting, dad made sure I was not alone with him.”

“Did your stepmother know about this?” Dr. Kulkarni was curious as to why Mr. Rana had not taken strict action against the very man who abused his daughter? Why did Ramola not protect Sonya then? He soon got his answer. Mr. Rana wanted to keep his family together.

“I am not sure. And it looked like dad did not want to upset her. Slowly he stopped coming. Next, I heard he died in some freak accident in his house.” Sonya had a faraway look in her eyes.

“Doc, do you think he committed suicide? I heard he was alcoholic. He was not someone, who would end his own life. Nevertheless, he was a creep. He deserved to be killed.” She was talking to herself. An indulgence that had become a constant in her life, observed the sharp doctor.

Dr. Kulkarni made a note of Vikram’s death and sexual abuse that Sonya went through. He needed to ask Ramola Rana about it.

“Why did you bear the abuse? You had a chance to talk to your father about it... or anyone in the house.”

“I had no choice... I never had a choice.” Sonya said looking away, pain reflected in her blue eyes.

Dr. Kulkarni keyed in some notes in his Tab, pushing up his glasses that kept sliding down. “Everyone has a choice. It is simply a matter of interpretation...”

“My interpretation was my family. I wanted to stay close at any cost. You don’t understand what it is to be lonely.” Her blue eyes rapidly filling up with tears.

“I was shunned for months together by everyone at home. A price I had to pay for telling the truth.” Sonya had cut him off rudely, hugged herself and rocked on the couch, once again.

Childhood memories flashed before her eyes. The swing in their backyard, facing the mountains came to her mind. Sonya and Tania swinging on it endlessly. Tania had a lovely voice and she sang as Sonya, her head in Tania’s lap would stare at the skies, swinging at 180 degrees. The hugs and kisses she showered Sonya with every morning... they woke her up with a smile!

If Sonya had replied in affirmative to her dad that evening, her mother would have made sure Sonya was packed off to some hostel, far away from her house, her sister, her dad as she had threatened she would. Sonya knew her step-mum would go to any lengths to keep up with her threats. Sonya closed her eyes, not wanting these memories to torment her.

Dr. Kulkarni noticed Sonya shrug her shoulders as if she wanted to override the thoughts. This girl was still keeping something to herself, he thought. Such were the laws of nature. People always harbored deep dark secrets!

His observations were precise and to the point. Sonya Rana was mentally stressed. She was capable of mood swings and had tremendous ups and downs in her mental chart. Sonya suffered from Behavioral Psychological Disorder. It was a classic case of depression with primary suicidal thoughts.

Tania got up and walked over to her sister who had just emerged from the doctor’s cabin. Sonya wore glares that hid her face and her ginger colored hair in bun was wrapped carefully in a scarf. However hard she tried to hide behind huge glasses and scarf, her demeanor gave her away. Heads turned, curious eyes followed her as Sonya walked by.

Dr. Kulkarni was at the door, when he saw Tania’s arm protectively go around her sister’s shoulder. They hugged as Tania gave her a once over. She seemed to murmur something in her ears and Sonya nodded her head in affirmative. The two sisters then walked out together.

Dr. Kulkarni smiled, thinking to himself how lucky Sonya was to have a sister like Tania; a friend, a confidante.