

THE UNEXPECTED SON

Prologue

There was something odd about it, despite its plain and inconsequential appearance. Vinita gazed at the mystery envelope for a long moment, weighed it in the palm of her hand. Her instincts were prickling. It went beyond mere feminine intuition.

She didn't receive any letters from her family in India anymore. Cheap long-distance telephone rates and email had put an end to that somewhat antiquated form of communication.

The smudged postal seal on the envelope read Mumbai—one of India's largest and most populous cities—a place Vinita was very familiar with. The envelope had that typical "India" look—multiple postage stamps in various colors and sizes; thin brown paper; and the sealing flap placed over the vertical edge, unlike the American style horizontal edge. But it didn't look like the occasional wedding invitation or the quarterly statements from the bank where she and husband maintained a small account in rupees.

There was no return address, but it was sent to her attention—neatly hand-printed. She slit it open with her finger and eased out the contents—a single sheet of white ruled paper. Her hands shook a little. She wasn't sure if it was anticipation or anxiety. Or both.

The message was brief—a few lines penned in blue ink. She scanned it quickly, trying to ignore the tingle crawling up her spine like the cautious progress of a venomous spider. The subject matter was bizarre. The writer's name was missing. The trembling in her hands edged up a notch.

Only minutes ago, it had looked like any ordinary Saturday morning—a day to recoup after five hectic days of poring over spreadsheets, memos, and databases till her eyeballs ached and

her back turned stiff as cardboard.

This morning, lying in bed, through drowsy eyes she'd watched the first shimmering rays of sunlight poke their fingers through the window blinds. The sound of the wind whistling through the pale green spring foliage was a sign of a brisk but sunny April day.

May, her favorite month, was right around the corner. The dogwoods and azaleas in the neighborhood, weighed down by fat, succulent buds, attested to that. Spring was always such a buoyant season, so full of promise. It had brought a contented smile to her lips.

Reminding herself that it was time to emerge from the warm cocoon of the down comforter, she'd sat up in bed, stretched like a slothful kitten, and leaned back against the headboard. She'd managed to grab more than two extra hours of sleep. Her reward for waking early on weekdays.

Her husband was on a business trip to Detroit, and wasn't due to return until the following week, so she had the weekend to herself. She'd planned to indulge herself by brewing a cup of scalding *masala chai*—strong tea delicately laced with her own blend of five spices instead of the usual coffee-on-the-run on weekdays at the office. Then she was going to eat lunch at the taco place and do some shopping at the mall.

Working late the previous evening had prevented her from looking at the mail right away. Exhausted, she'd tossed the stack of correspondence on the nightstand, eaten a quick meal of leftovers, and gone straight to bed.

Now, as she sat on the bed in her aqua print pajamas and checked the mail before getting dressed, she wondered if the weekend of self-indulgence she'd been looking forward to was already beginning to wilt and curl at the edges. The tacos and the shopping spree no longer appealed.

Who could have sent her the odd message? An old friend? An acquaintance? She blew her

disheveled bangs out of her eyes to read it again, more carefully this time. Perhaps there were clues she had missed the first time.

My dear Mrs. Patil,

I am writing to tell you about your son. He is suffering from myeloid leukemia. Many years ago, I had made a promise that I will never reveal anything about him, but this is a serious matter. A bone marrow transplant is his last hope. My conscience will not allow me to let a young man die without having a chance to try every possible treatment. Your brother may be able to give you all the details.

I leave the matter in your hands.

Best Regards & Blessings,

A well-wisher

Who was this nameless letter-writer? And why had he or she chosen to remain anonymous? Something about the message was disturbing.

How could someone spring something like this on a total stranger? Whose son were they talking about, anyway? Was it possible the letter was erroneously mailed to her? But what if it wasn't a mistake and she was indeed the intended recipient?

Was this someone's idea of a sick joke? But then, why would they spend over forty rupees to mail something all the way to the U.S. as a mere prank? Everything about the letter spelled serious intent.

This was no hoax ...