

Friday night. The sky hung heavy, seamless, with heaven's stars blotted out by overbearing skyscrapers. Shrieks and a cacophony of cheers rang out, hysteria supreme in a microscopic stadium rocking on the edge of Boston's South End. Thin and buckling bleachers rattled with the stomps of impending mania, shrill whistles and hefty shouts: those were the true sounds of redemption. Fourteen years and not a single touchdown against Madison High; fourteen years, but no more.

It had come at the hands of a freshman running back who couldn't stop moving, a last-minute, fidgeting substitution. To others, his appearance must have seemed a concession, but Edy Phelps knew better. Edy Phelps knew *him* better.

He was hunger and discipline, jittery and ravenous, so rattled that nerves kept him shifting and stretching and pacing along the sidelines. Obsession fueled him, and kept him keen on an opportunity unwilling to come. Except that night, *chance* came to Hassan Pradhan. His chance. Finally.

It happened in a breath. A snap of the ball. A fake pass and Hassan thundered downfield at a speed only fear could sustain. His moment. His only moment. Take it. Take it. Run. *Fly*.

He could hear *her* thoughts—no, *feel* her thoughts. Edy was sure of it. They'd always had a connection. And it was in that way she aided him. Fists pressed to her lips, teeth slammed together, screaming with her soul. *Soar. I know you can do it.*

Just as the clock whittled to nothing, Hassan vaulted into the end zone.

A collective roar swallowed Edy and the crowd leapt as one. A win. Few would recall the last.

On her left, Hassan's parents cheered: mother in a starched linen suit and pumps too prim for a game, father in a white button-up, belly pressing the fabric, sleeves rolled to the elbow. His

mother, Rani, was without the brilliant red bindi she couldn't do without, giving her forehead that naked look. On Edy's opposite end were her parents, their absolute best friends, in the long-sleeved alumni tees reserved for football season, mother free of the skirt suits that dictated her days. Edy abandoned them all for the sidelines, for Hassan. She weaved round patches of shrieking upperclassmen, hopped over rows of empty benches, apologized to the fat man whose cocoa she sloshed, and ignored the slice of a sudden, early winter wind.

*He'd done it.*

All those nights, all those talks, round and round about the possibility of getting in a game, the two of them in bedroom shadows, careful to keep their voices low. Some nights he thought a chance would never come; others, he insisted it had to. Either way, he always said that if it did, *when* it did, he would do something worth remembering. And he had.

At the sidelines, Edy's gaze swept a team clustered so thick, so honeyed together with the sweetness of victory, that she worried she might never find her neighbor, her best friend.

Ice cut the air, and the glare of stadium lights had her like an ant under a magnifying glass in the noonday sun. She remembered the way the Dyson twins would burn insects and snicker, and she thought no, she'd be hot if she were a tortured ant, not cold. The fog of her breath seconded her motion.

She spotted him.

Edy had come to hug someone already occupied, someone surrounded by sweeping blonde curls, dark curtains of perfect hair, nestled by an endless supply of short skirts. Hassan draped an easy arm around a cheerleader with shimmering flaxen locks, mouth curling into a grin when a brunette of with pouty lips cried foul and claimed him as her own. Soft tans and the curves of certain womanhood donned them both. Edy looked from them to her own angular body

and knew what she would find: all edges and sharpness, slender, muscles sculpted from a life of dance. The baggy jeans, football jersey, and sloppy poof of a ponytail she wore didn't give her much to run with either. That hair used to be the brunt of Hassan's endless jokes. Big enough to tip you back," he'd say, before tugging it in absentminded affection. She fingered that hair with the same sort of absent- -mindedness, before looking up to see a blonde plant rosy lips on Hassan's cheek.

*Ugh.*

Edy didn't care about the movies, the books, the popular culture that insisted football player and cheerleader, jock and pretty girl, were a natural sort of fit. It wasn't. *They* weren't. It absolutely couldn't be.

A girl like that couldn't understand what made him *him*. So what if he was . . . obscenely gorgeous, with sun-licked bronze skin, silken black locks, and eyes an ever-glimmering, gold-flecked green. He had a quiet sort of beauty, made for old Greek sculptures and timeless works of art. Not that he was quiet. *He* was explosive, with good looks and athleticism. But beyond that were pleasures and disappointments, what he loved and could not bear. Imprinted on Edy's mind were the crinkles at the corner of Hassan's eyes when he smiled, the clench of his jaw when irritation set in, the rich and sonorous laugh that had slipped octaves lower in recent years. A girl like that blonde could be nothing to him—could know nothing *of* him. She knew a moment and a touchdown. That was it.

Edy's hands made fists.

The blonde moved in to kiss his cheek again, just as a teammate shouted his name. Hassan jerked back, only to be caught at the corner of his mouth by her lips.

A whoop rang out from the guys.

Heat flushed Edy's veins and her fingernails dug, digging, digging, until tears blurred her vision.

*Wait.*

He was her best friend, family really, if you considered the way they were brought up. So, she really had no reason to—

The blonde threw her arms around Hassan. The team swarmed and the two disappeared from sight.

They were kissing, weren't they?

Edy closed her eyes, forcing back the hottest tears and the bitterest taste of sudden envy.

*She loved him.* Dear God, she loved her best friend.

It fell down on her at once, uncompromising truth and the weight of reality like a cloak too heavy to bear.

The boy that had grown by her side, promised to another in a tradition as old as marriage itself, another girl of his ethnicity, religion, beliefs: that's the boy she loved. A single line existed between Edy's family and his, between the Pradhans and Phelps, who otherwise acted as one.

But Edy loved him.

And, of course, there was no recourse for that.