

# Roshna's Gift to Give

(Note: This story uses British spelling.)

## Chapter 1

*On the first day of Christmas, my true  
love sent to me  
A partridge in a pear tree.*

*On the second day of Christmas, my  
true love sent to me  
Two turtledoves,  
And a partridge in a pear tree. ...*

On Christmas morning, as the “olde tyme” seasonal song performed in a hip-hop style by Tiny Tim and the Christmas Carollers crackled through the radio, 16-year-old Roshna Gupta sat under a scrawny silver-foil Christmas tree that was surviving its seventh year, and tore open the packages tagged with her name.



After but a couple of minutes, she sighed and gazed with disdain at the discarded wrappers and their contents surrounding her: a pair of tights, gloves, and an olive-green cardigan purchased from the local Salvation Army charity shop, a tawdry costume necklace, and a hand-me-down blouse from her cousin, a tiny bottle of perfume—a freebie that had come with one of her mother’s purchases at Superdrug, and a bag of liquorice allsorts.

*I suppose I have to look at it like “it’s the thought that counts...”* Roshna sarcastically mused.

*On the sixth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me  
Six geese a-laying,  
Five golden rings,  
Four calling birds,  
Three French hens,  
Two turtledoves,  
And a partridge in a pear tree.*

*Hmmph. That stupid suitor must have had more money than sense  
to send his lover such extravagant and useless gifts. ...*

It was the season of goodwill and cheer, but Roshna was taking little care to manifest such spirits. Her twelve-year-old brother, Nandi, however, was beaming at a brand-new cricket bat, and profusely thanking its donor—Michael—who was sitting in a corner sipping on a bottle of stout and plucking jazz scales on an electric guitar.

*Well, that's nice for Nandi ... but what about me? Do I get anything  
from my mother's boyfriend?*

Roshna, Nandi, and their 38-year-old mother, Chitrathi, shared a two-bedroom flat in the London suburb of Southall, an Indian community. Despite welfare subsistence, the little family was poor. Except for a cousin who lived in England's Midlands city of Wolverhampton, Chitrathi's other relatives lived in India, and her husband Sadhil had left her and their two children eight years ago for a successful career in California's Silicon Valley.

*Yet we have received nothing from him in all these years, and as much as I have been pushing her, Mum has never taken him to task for support. Fat lot of good her "do unto others as you would they do unto you" and "give and it shall be given unto you" religion does for her.*

As Christian as these creeds are generally supposed to be, the Gupta family were Hindu. Roshna's mother was a generous soul, tossing her "mites" of time, attention, and even money whenever the opportunity arose, to those deprived of such treats, while countering her offspring's objections with the karmic maxim: "You reap what you sow."

*Yeah, right. Where's Mum's generosity getting her? A hovel, some charity's pity, and a boyfriend who can't even afford a car.*

Chitrathi's boyfriend was 39-year-old Michael Ridley, who worked as a printer in nearby Ealing, and having recently divorced his wife of 12 years, lived alone in a one-room bedsit. He didn't own a car because he didn't want one.

"Too much hassle with petrol and parking," he would say. "Ride the bus, and leave the driving to us,' the bus companies say, and I like to take 'em up on that."

Despite this air of affable simplicity, Michael was a complex, reclusive man, whose aptitude for playing intricate jazz on his electric guitar supplemented his meagre income through performing at the occasional jazz club and private functions.

He had briefly met Chitrathi at one of those functions, her cousin's wedding. The two of them became further acquainted while shopping at Southall's local bazaars, where Michael, being a lover of Indian food and an excellent cook like Chitrathi, was purchasing the ingredients to prepare a bachelor's evening meal of lamb biryani.

Their initial conversation about cuisine unexpectedly turned to religion. Michael was nominally a Christian, although he never attended church; Chitrathi was essentially a Hindu but she ate meat and observed the meaning of Christmas more than just its tradition.

"Because," she had once explained to Roshna and Nandi, "if we expect Christians to respect *our* beliefs, we ought to respect theirs."

Hence, following Sadhil's departure, with no objection from her children, Chitrathi introduced a Christmas tree to the Gupta home.

*Twelve drummers drumming,  
Eleven pipers piping,  
Ten lords a-leaping,  
Nine ladies dancing,  
Eight maids a-milking...*

*Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat,* a Cockney lad, apparently Tiny Tim himself, plaintively warbled over the fading chorus in contrast to the carol's opulent theme.

*Please put a penny in the old man's hat.  
If you don't have a penny, a halfpenny will do.*

*If you don't have a halfpenny,  
Well, God bless you.*

Roshna snorted and rolled her eyes.

*Huh. Christmas is here and not even a chicken has gotten fat for us—much less a goose. I haven't a penny in my pocket, and if He even exists, I don't feel that God is blessing me or my mother and brother. ...*

Suddenly, those rolling eyes fell upon a small envelope that she had overlooked, and her name was written upon it. Roshna tore it open and her jaw dropped.

"A hundred and twenty pounds!" she exclaimed.

Nandi spun around and gaped at her. "You got *a hundred and twenty quid* for Christmas?"

"Yes."

"Who from?"

"Umm. ..."

"Read the note inside, luv," said Michael.

"Dear Roshna, here is a gift of a hundred and twenty pounds to spend at..." Roshna broke off, and after reading silently for a minute, burst into tears. She threw the note down along with the envelope, jumped to her feet and ran into her bedroom.

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"What on earth is wrong, dear?" Chitrathi said, taking her sobbing daughter in her arms.

"You have no idea, mother? Did you read that 'happy Christmas' note to me from your 'generous' boyfriend?"

"I haven't. Is it inappropriate ... offensive?"

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“*Very*. ‘Dear Roshna,’ it says, ‘here is a gift of a hundred and twenty pounds to spend at the rate of ten pounds a month throughout the coming year on *others*, such as someone who needs it or could use it.’ Words to that effect. What sort of gift is that?”

“I don’t know what to say, except that it’s remarkably interesting,” said Chitrathi.

“Interesting?”

“Yes, Michael and I had discussed something regarding your ... but I didn’t think he would go about it in quite this fashion.”

“Discussed and go about what?”

“Helping you to think more about others. You know how I have, umm ... tried to bring it up.”

“So you’ve been discussing my faults with your boyfriend behind my back!”

“It’s not like that at all. Michael thinks very highly of you, Roshna. He just feels that learning a little unselfishness on your part would round out your character. I had asked him to help in whatever way he can, seeing as you seem to take note of his opinions.”

“I won’t anymore, Mum.”

“Even his opinion that you are intelligent and talented?”

“Er ... that’s not the point. A Christmas gift like this is, quite frankly ... *insulting*.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but do consider his gift. Michael had every good intention, and you should at least thank him out of common courtesy.”

Roshna wiped her eyes, straightened her carriage, and re-entered the living room with admirable resolve.

“Thank you for the gift, Mr. Ridley,” she managed to say through pursed lips.

“You are welcome, Roshna. I am sure you will spend it wisely. Happy Christmas.”

“H-happy Christmas.”

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New Year’s overcast day arrived a week later, and curry houses, vegetable shops, bhangra music, and a rainbow of saris and fabrics were bombarding Southall’s bustling Broadway with their smells, sounds, and sights.

“A hundred and twenty quid!” Nandi said to his sister as they trudged through the crowds and the grey slushy remnants of the season’s snowfall. “That’s quite a Christmas present.”

“Could have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“You obviously haven’t wanted to discuss it. So what are you going to spend it on?”

After some silent deliberation, Roshna reached into her handbag. “Starting today...” she mumbled, “*you!*”

Nandi’s face lit up as his sister crushed a crisp bill into his hand. “*What?*”

“There’s ten pounds of it to spend on whatever you want.”

“Are you serious?”

“Deadly. And don’t ask questions.”

“Whoa ... well, thank you. But what will you do with the rest of it?”

Roshna shrugged. “I will have to see. So, what are *you* buying with it?”

“No idea. Some pears for starters, maybe. You know how I like pears.”

“I do, but they’re out of season. Although a couple of quid should get you a measly kilo or so.”

“Right. And maybe ... corny as you may think ... I’ll buy a retro CD of the Partridge Family.”

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## Chapter 2

Nandi winked at his sister and grinned through a mouthful of dhal. They had convened for a quick snack and were about to leave their flat. He for a cricket match and Roshna for a rendezvous. “So, who did you give your ten quid to last month?”

Roshna downed the remains of her chai and arose from the table. She said nothing. Three months had passed since Christmas, and not until but a couple of days before had she told her brother the humiliating purpose behind Michael Ridley’s gift. She was even then regretting having done so.

“The boyfriend you’re meeting, right?” Nandi prodded. “*Saint Francis?*”

“He’s not my boyfriend. And he’s not a saint ... at least not what one would call a saint according to popular perception.”

“I suppose not, especially if he has—”

“He has done no such thing, Nandi. He’s far too ... umm ... holy. Anyway, I gave the money to my English teacher, Miss Burroughs.”

Nandi laughed. “‘Bunny’ Burroughs? A donation towards fixing her buck teeth?”

“That is ever so unkind. No, I gave it to her anonymously in an envelope, which I put on her desk. I had overheard her talking on the phone about her two white doves dying, lost to the winter chill. ...”

“This is so weird, Roshna.”

“What’s so weird?”

“You ... you know, thinking about other people like that. It used to be all about *you*. Now you’re ... how do I say it? *Different*. You want to be another Mother Teresa, or something?”

“Giving ten quid a month to someone who could use it doesn’t exactly make me Mother Teresa. Especially as I was more or less *constrained* to do it.”

“I understand, but it’s not just that. It’s something in your...”

“Whatever, Nandi,” Roshna said with a toss of her hair as she left the kitchen. “But thank you for the compliment. And I will have to see if I will give this month’s ten pounds to my ‘boyfriend.’”

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Roshna's assumed "boyfriend," Francis Ambrose, was a tall, bespectacled soft-spoken Indian youth of seventeen who had met Roshna briefly at a Southall Bhangra club.

He had casually mentioned his passion for traditional Irish music and dance, and his aside resulted in Roshna deciding to give him the following month's ten pounds toward a ticket for an upcoming *Abhainn Damhsa* show at a nearby theatre.

"It's not much, I know," Roshna said that late afternoon as she and Francis strolled across a nearby common, having confessed to him her monthly obligation in lieu of Michael Ridley's gift.

"Yes, but it's more than even *I* expected, Roshna, especially when I was expecting nothing."

"That sounds callous."

"No. It isn't my birthday, it's a long way until Ganesh Chaturthi or even Christmas, and we hardly know each other."

Roshna giggled and wrung her hands.

"Anyway," said Francis, "what provokes you to give to a certain person that month?"

"I don't know. At first, I just wanted to get it over with because I resented the motive of the gift. But now, something stands out about the recipients or their situation. In your case, it was your passion for that style of music."



"I see. 'For it is in giving that we receive, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.'"

"That's deep," said Roshna.

"It's a phrase from my namesake's prayer."

"Francis? Francis who?"

"Saint Francis. I consider his prayer my life's creed ... although I fall most miserably short many times."

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"I suppose none of us is perfect," Roshna softly said.

"True. But *you* are as close as it gets."

Roshna's mouth fell open. She tried to speak but nothing came except a flush to her cheeks.

"I mean it," said Francis.

"But a saint is supposed to be perfect ... at least that is what I have been led to believe about such people."

"You're perfect to me," said Francis.

"Then you don't see me as I really am. I am miserably selfish to a fault. Even in my giving of this measly ten quid a month, I sense a self-serving motive. 'Oh, how generous am I.' It's horrible to see."

"Cool. You don't bask in your own goodness."

"I don't? Look, Francis, I had seriously considered spending the money on something I wanted, but besides worrying about what Mum would have said should I have done so, I fed my ego by deciding to use the gift as Michael suggested."

"Again, Roshna. You are not afraid to confess and confront your deeper failings. That's saintly."

"Okay, if you say so. But my mother—"

"A wonderful woman from all accounts."

"Yes. She's a *real* saint. Everyone considers her so, and I am beginning to as well. More than what she says—which is basically the law of karma—it's according to what she *does*. You know..."

"Sowing and reaping," Francis softly responded. "The first six principles of Saint Francis's prayer."

Roshna wrung her hands tighter and slowly walked away. She stopped and let out a sigh. "But do you know what, Francis? I do feel better since I have been doing this. *Warmer* or something."

"I can see that. The very karmic reward in your aura is evident."

"I assume you're Catholic and you are into all that?"

"I'm not Catholic. My family is Hindu, but I take something from everything that's good. Angels, astrology ... whatever. It's gone into other things. ..."

"Like what?"

"Oh, ESP, astral travel, channelling, and so forth."

"I don't know about all that," Roshna said as Francis took her hand. "It's like believing in ghosts or something. But my mother also tries to see and accept the good in many belief systems. You don't object to someone doing so?"

"Why should I when I do it myself?"

"Well, my mother has met some criticism for being a Hindu when attending some Christian churches. One young pastor told her she was trying to sup at the table of Christ while worshipping in the temple of idols and devils. She even wanted to take communion in a Catholic church, and she was refused."

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"I don't even know why she bothers going, and I resent having to accompany her. Some of the Hindu priests are little better—giving her a hard time about having a Christmas tree and neglecting to acknowledge Lord Pancha Ganapati and whoever else."

"Sad. But the point is, Roshna, does your mother love God and her fellow man?"

"To a fault, although I hate to say it."

"Love can *never* be to a fault," said Francis, and drew Roshna closer to him. "Christ said on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Roshna's heart was beating as he touched her cheek and compassion emanated from his warm, dark eyes. "That is why, once I have finished university, I want to take my vows."

"Vows?"

Francis chuckled. "If they will take me despite my heretical mishmash of a belief system, I am considering joining the order of my namesake."

"I don't get it," said Roshna. "Please explain."

"I would like to be a Franciscan monk."

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The telephone rang and Chitrathi picked it up. She smiled and handed it to Roshna. "Francis," she said.

After a short exchange, during which Roshna said little more

than "yes," "uh-huh," and "I'll have to see," she put the phone back on the hook and turned to her mother.

"Instead of going to the Irish *Abhainn Damhsa* show, Francis wants to use the ten pounds I gave him towards taking me out to dinner this weekend."

"Sounds nice, especially as I see all this attention is because of your giving. But you don't seem too excited."

Roshna shrugged. Chitrathi patted her daughter's head and smiled. "I suppose I should play the role of the concerned mother right now?"

"You don't need to worry, Mum."

"I presume this Francis is a fine boy."

"Yes ... he says he lives the creed of his namesake. A Catholic saint."

"And what is that creed?"

"Saint Francis's prayer."

"I see," said Chitrathi. "For it is in giving that we receive, and it is in dying that we are born to everlasting life."

"Amazing. He quoted that very line and asked me if I knew anyone else who preaches that: 'Where there is hatred, let me sow love,' and 'where there is doubt, let me sow faith.'"

"So, what did you say?"

"I just told him that *you* did, and we talked about karma."

"And...?"

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“He said that Saint Francis’s creed went further than merely ‘you reap what you sow,’ and that it was more active than passive. I argued that you did more than talk. I don’t remember what he said.”

“He could be right, Roshna. But in general, the issue is not to argue religion and who is right—”

“We didn’t argue, Mother. But then he told me that he’s set on becoming a Franciscan monk.”

“Oh ... how did you respond?”

“I tried to be brave, and I encouraged him to follow his passion. But I came home and bawled my eyes out.”

“I am sorry, Roshna. Although this keeps the relationship ‘safe’ in my eyes, I am concerned about your happiness and heart. Yet”—Chitrathi paused and smiled—“Francis sounds like an interesting young man. ... I would like to meet him.”

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And meet Francis, Chitrathi did—and like him, she did. Roshna, being ashamed of her dwelling, had divulged little about it to Francis, and she was reluctant for them to meet at home. Fortunately, Francis’s insistence prevailed, and upon stepping across the threshold of their flat, he returned Roshna’s shamefacedness with an approving smile.

“I would that *my* home had such warmth,” he said as he settled into an armchair with a cup of Chitrathi’s singular masala chai.

“You cannot afford heating?”

Francis laughed. “I am speaking metaphorically, Mrs. Gupta! My home is devoid of such, er ... *tangible* loving-kindness.”

And so, while suffering her mother’s vocal approval and silent, invisible chaperoning, along with Nandi’s playful cynicism, Roshna continued to see Francis occasionally throughout the rest of the year.

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## Chapter 3

Exactly twelve months had now passed since last year's Christmas Day, and instead of melancholy, scintillating cheerfulness pervaded the Gupta family's flat, mainly due to a certain young lady's change of mood and heart.

In the corner of the living room, next to the newly acquired genuine Christmas fir tree, Roshna was knee deep in gifts and greetings. She was shaking her head in disbelief as she read the abundance of accolades showered upon her, some from people she did not even know. Chitrathi was watching her out of the corner of her eye and resisting the urge to remind her daughter that it was all a result of her giving. Nandi was engrossed in his gift of a phone from Michael Ridley.

Michael himself, with his fingers fluttering over his guitar frets, was chuckling as he triumphantly watched a computer boot up. "Now Roshna can Skype and twitter to her heart's content!" he announced.

"Did she ever?" Chitrathi asked.

"On a computer in the school library," said Nandi.

"Limited and supervised time, Mum," Roshna muttered. "Don't worry."

"I see. Well, I hope it has been for worthwhile purposes."

"Anyway, come over here and try it out," Michael said to Roshna.

Roshna pulled up a chair in front of the computer and tapped a few keys. "Th-that was nice of your boyfriend to buy us this for Christmas, Mum."

Chitrathi laughed. "More specifically, *you*, dear. My computer skills are virtually nil!"

"Nandi's getting into it, too, Mother. ..."

"Ah, the irony of it!" said Michael.

"The irony of what?"

"How the computer age has done much to isolate and consign people to their individual little worlds."

"All too true," said Chitrathi. "That is why I have been reluctant to introduce such technology into the home, even if we could have afforded it."

"What changed your mind, Mum?" said Nandi.

Chitrathi smiled and looked sheepishly at Michael. "Friendly persuasion!" she said, and waved at their surroundings. "I have so wished more for both of you than..." she began.

The phone rang and Roshna answered. "Yes? Oh ... I see. You're his chauffeur? I didn't know he had a chauffeur. ... *Tickets?* To where?"

Roshna signalled to her mother, who turned down the radio. Michael stopped playing his guitar and the sudden subtraction from the noise level captured even Nandi's attention. Roshna handed the phone to Chitrathi.

"I'm sorry, Mum ... but I can't handle this."

"Francis Ambrose? Yes, my daughter is well acquainted with him. He sent *what?* ... For when? That's New Year's Eve. ... Yes, I will inform her. Thank you."

Chitrathi put down the phone and addressed her daughter. "Francis has arranged for you to join him for the New Year's Eve premiere in-the-round performance of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* ballet at the Royal Albert Hall. He also arranged for his chauffeur to pick you up here, take you there, and bring you back home."

"But I don't have a stitch of appropriate clothes!"

"The chauffeur said that suitable transport and wardrobe will be provided until midnight."

"And Francis is paying for all this?" Roshna asked.

"Seems like it," said Chitrathi. "After all, he is quite well off."

"You think so?"

With a twinkle in her eyes, Chitrathi settled into the sofa next to her daughter with a couple of glasses of Michael's home-brewed eggnog, one of which she handed to Roshna. "I always felt there was more to Francis than meets the eye."

"Bad?"

"To the contrary, my dear girl. His good bearing, manners, and being so well spoken ... no, I am not surprised. Cheers. A toast to his and your future, my dear girl. Merry Christmas."

"M-merry Christmas, Mother," said Roshna.

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Feeling like a transformed yet bewildered Ashputtel, Roshna Gupta, clad in a black cashmere maxi coat atop a form-fitting green velvet dress and black suede booties, stepped out of a silver BMW, acknowledged the bowing chauffeur with a smile and "Thank you, Henry," and trotted up the steps of the Royal Albert Hall.

As she entered the reception, a liveried silver-haired man approached her.

"Miss Roshna Gupta?"

"Y-yes."



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“Good evening, Miss Gupta. My name is Percival. I am your assigned valet for the evening. Mr. Ambrose has been a little detained, but you have time to benefit from some of our pre-show hospitality.”

“And what is that, sir?”

“Dinner. Our two-course menu from a choice...”

“I am sorry, but I did not know that a meal was included. I made sure to have a snack before coming.”

“Then perhaps you would at least partake of a suitable celebratory beverage upon arrival at the restaurant, and if the menu is not to your liking, maybe indulge in a dessert?”

“O-of course. Very well.”

“The performance begins in twenty-five minutes. May I take your coat?”

Once Percival had guided her to the theatre’s plush, ambient-lit restaurant, Roshna sat down at a table for two and perused the menu as she sipped on a beverage. The choice of a main course was between lamb biryani and Tandoori chicken, her two favourite dishes.

“I cannot resist,” she said to the attending waiter. “Lamb biryani. It’s rather amazing actually, that ... *Francis!*”

Francis, dressed in a white tuxedo, bowed, pulled up a chair in front of her and sat down. He seemed hurried.

“I am sorry I am late, Roshna. Business affairs came up.”

“And you, sir?” the waiter said and nodded to Francis’s cues. “The same ... I see. Would you care for anything to drink? Of course, right away, sir.”

The waiter picked up the menus and hurried off, and Roshna stared incredulously at Francis. “This is most disturbing,” she muttered. “I am sorry, but I suddenly don’t feel at all hungry under these circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” Francis asked.

Roshna called for the waiter and cancelled her order, saying she would take a glass of lemongrass tea instead.

“This ... all *this*. I had no idea you were rich, ... and what about your idea of joining a Franciscan order? Are you still serious?”

“I have changed my mind ... actually, *they* did. As soon as I expressed my unorthodox belief system, they expressed no uncertain reluctance. Then I thought about you ... *us*, and well, it is in giving that we receive, you know. Dessert?”

“No, thank you. I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.”

“You ‘gave’ me away, Roshna. You encouraged me to follow that desire to your own hurt, and that made me love you even more. On top of that, you loved me without knowing about what you call ... ‘all *this*!’”

“S-so, w-what does that mean?”

Francis glanced at his watch and gave a start. “I must cancel my order, too. We need to get to the box.”

“We have box seats?”

“We’re booked in the grand tier,” he said and promptly led Roshna out of the restaurant and up a flight of richly carpeted backstairs.

Francis lowered his voice. "Look, you will be meeting my father and mother and brother. I have said nothing about your station ... you know, your..."

"I know what you're saying," said Roshna. "I'm poor—you're rich and all that."

"Yes. But I have requested that they refrain from asking you about yourself. Let your *mystique* speak."

Presently, they entered the curtained quarters overlooking the stage, and Francis introduced Roshna to the other occupants: a portly greying man and a handsome, swarthy youth of about 15 years old, who both wore tuxedos, and a regal older woman with silver-tinged auburn hair, who was wearing a red and gold silk sari. They rose from their seats, and Roshna bowed as they in turn took her hand.

"Pleased to meet you," said the man, who Francis introduced as his father, Maharaja Sadar.

"And my mother, Maharani Kumari," said Francis.

"A pleasure," the woman said.

"And my brother..."

"Thomas," said the youth, taking Roshna's hand and kissing it. He drew his breath and smiled. "Delightful. Your perfume ... or is it your natural scent?"

"J-just a little musk oil. Essence, you know."

"Anyway, my brother has made an excellent choice."

Roshna gulped and fidgeted.

"You seem uncomfortable, dear," said the lady.

"With what, ma'am?"

"Being here."

"W-well, I didn't expect it. And not with such illustrious company."

"Who on earth does? Ah ... the performance is commencing. Let us enjoy. Binoculars?"

"Binoculars ... for what?"

"To see the cast more clearly, dear. There should be a pair in the pocket in the front of your seat."

"I was set on using them to see Annabelle Muehler, the star of this concert," Thomas whispered. "But I would prefer to set my sights on..."

"Sssh, darling..." said Maharani Kumari. "This is most significant ... and one has to concentrate to catch it. ... It's the terrace in front of the palace of Prince Siegfried."

The ballet was riveting for Roshna, as it was for those in the box and most of the audience, and the performance passed quickly. As the swelling strains of the closing music enveloped them, Maharani Kumari closed her tear-filled eyes and leaned her head back. Roshna was about to do the same when Francis whispered in her ear.

"I do hope *I* end up marrying the true princess."

Roshna sat up. "I am so sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. She turned to the others.

"I appreciate your hospitality, but I wonder if we ... *I* must leave."

"What?" said Maharani Kumari.

"So soon?" said Maharaja Sadar.

"I feel a little flu-ish. I would hate for anyone to catch something."

"*Wait*," Francis said and stood up. "I'll ring Henry, and we can—"

"I'm sorry. But I must go home ... *alone*."

Having said that, Roshna exited the box, and after claiming her coat from Percival, dashed out of the theatre.

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## Chapter 4

“I would prefer to just walk,” Roshna breathlessly informed the chauffeur as he held the car door open.

“Whatever Miss wishes. But I’ll stick by you, anyways. Never can tell what’ll happen to a young girl all prettied up on a Saturday night. Especially on New Year’s Eve.”

“That is ever so kind of you, Henry, but I will take the tube.”

“Very well. Just let me know your destination. Remember I need to get you home before midnight, otherwise we’ll turn...”

“Of course. The ‘turning into pumpkins’ joke. Don’t worry.”

“I won’t,” said Henry. “But I’ll be around.”

Her mind whirling with perplexities, Roshna trotted through the bustling streets of Westminster, pausing only to appreciate particularly attractive window displays until she stopped by the embankment. There, while gazing at the Thames, she attempted to unravel those thoughts.

*Francis ... “Saint” Francis. Here I was being so secretive about my home and background, and I never thought to ask him about his. I never dreamed...*

A few minutes passed, and Roshna, feeling none the wiser after her silent soliloquy, shook her head and continued walking. She thought that maybe she could make the tube line to Osterley station before catching the last train to Southall.

*“On the seventh day of Christmas, my true love sent to me seven swans a-swimming...”*

Arrested by an unusually angelic rendition of the familiar refrain, Roshna stopped in front of a small group of Christmas carollers. She listened for a while and then dropped a few coins into the proffered cap of the youngest member, a red-haired little boy with flushed, freckled cheeks who was supporting himself on crutches.

“If ye ’aven’t got a penny, a ha’penny will do,” he said with a Cockney chirp.

“That was more’n a penny,” Roshna said as she walked away, countering the impish glint in his eyes with a sparkle of her own. “That was at least 50p!”

“God bless you, Miss!” the boy called after her. “So, what did *your* true luv’ send to you today?”

“Today?” she called back. “Nothing. But tonight, he took me to see Swan Lake!”

*Tonight ... Roshna ruminated. The seventh night of Christmas. New Year’s Eve.*

As she walked on and the carollers’ voices faded, Roshna reflected over the past year. Twelve days ... twelve months...

Suddenly she halted and cocked her ear. Like angels beckoning her to return, the carollers had started up again with the same song.

*“On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me a partridge in a pear tree...”*

*Pears ... Nandi! But a partridge? ... Of course ... his retro CD of the Partridge Family!*

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Roshna dashed back down the street to where the carollers were standing, and after stopping to regain her posture and catch her breath, she perched on a nearby wall. She closed her eyes and listened.

*“On the second day of Christmas...”*

*Two turtle doves? Oh yes, Miss Burroughs ... but three French hens? I can't for the life of me, imagine what...*

“Yes, you can, Miss!”

Roshna opened her eyes to see the little red-haired boy standing in front of her with his cap in hand. This time, a little girl with shoulder-length blonde ringlets stood beside him.

“Can I what?” Roshna asked.

“Imagine what the three French hens mean to you,” said the boy.

“How did you know that was what I was ... did I say it out loud?”

The boy shook his head. “But ... let's see. For another 50p, we c'n tell you.”

“Umm ... I don't know,” said Roshna. “I'm a bit leery of this sort of thing—fortune telling and stuff.”

“Alrighty, but you'd better hurry up, Miss, afore the carol is over. My name's Tim, by the way, and this is Match.”

Roshna shook the children's outstretched hands and smiled. “Nice to meet you, Tim and umm ... *Match*—a most unusual name.”

“That was me nickname. I used to peddle matches.”

“Really? The story of the little match girl is my all-time favourite fairy tale. Anyway, I'm Roshna Gupta. ...”

“Luvverly,” said the girl.

“Well?” said Tim.



“Alright,” said Roshna, and dropped a coin into the boy’s cap. “Tell me—three French hens.”

The boy smiled and leaned closer. His voice dropped to a whisper. “Remember that ol’ drunk?”

“Old drunk?”

“That Irish geezer who staggered out o’ the public house that one night?”

“Oh, yes,” said Roshna. “If I recall, he was rambling on about not having enough money to buy a Sunday roast chicken dinner for his family of eight.”

“Right. And you gave him ten quid.”

“So I did. And his daughter, Siobhan, phoned me up and thanked me! How she got my name and number, I have no idea. Now I see it. A chicken ... March, the third month. It fits.”

“More’n that, Miss,” said Match. “Do you remember the name of the pub?”

Roshna shook her head.

“Three French Hens,” said Match.

“That’s right! *Amazing*. But how do you know all this?”

The girl smiled, the boy winked, and the two children let the carol regain Roshna’s attention for a few moments.

“Of course, you do remember the four calling birds,” Tim affirmed.

“Four calling birds? I really haven’t the foggiest.”

“In April, Miss. Four birds called you up to thank you for the effect your gift had on them or someone close to ’em.”

“*Birds...*” Roshna paused and giggled. “Of course, Tim, you’re talking about females! Yes, there was Nandi’s gym teacher at school who appreciated borrowing his CD of her teenage heartthrobs! Then, once she had found out I had given her the money, Miss Burroughs thanked me for her being able to replace her two doves that died, and there’s Siobhan, of course. Then ... oh, *goodness*! The ten pounds I gave to Louisa Cottrell to see *The Call*, that girlie gospel quartet...! Oh, this is most amazing!”

“True, Miss Roshna. Now the five golden rings.”

“Five ... the month of May ... oh, I haven’t a clue.”

“Isn’t that the month you gave the ten quid to Noel Bhinda?” said Match.

“If I recall, yes, and he won a raffle with it. But how on earth do you know all this?”

“Never mind, Miss,” said Tim. “Go on.”

“Well, Noel told me that he is using the money for a ticket and a return plane fare to the Winter Olympics in a couple of months. But what has that got to do with it?”

“What’s going to be unique ’bout the huge emblem flashing in the ’arbour there?”

“The news says it’ll be *gold*. Five golden rings! Amazing.”

“*On the sixth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me six geese a-laying...*”

“That’s easy,” said Roshna. “Whitsuntide holiday, the first week in June...”

## Chapter 5

Michael Ridley had long promised the Gupta family that when he came into a bit of money he would take them for a week's holiday in the country. Due to the exorbitant prices exacted for travel within Britain, they had barely seen the rural areas within even a few miles of London. Came into a bit of money, Michael did, and he rented a two-bedroom cottage close to Woodbridge in Suffolk on a place called Thatched Farm.

"It was beautiful," said Roshna. "Surrounded by gardens and open countryside, winding lanes, woods, and footpaths. It was just *heaven*. Except for..."

"Right," said Match. "The geese."

"Yes. They would honk away at the crack of dawn and wake me up. And, yes ... it was coming towards the end of their laying season!"

"And 'ow many do you think there was, Miss?"

"Oh, a dozen or so, maybe. Half of them were males. ... So, there must've been about six geese a-laying! This is so very intriguing! Seven swans a-swimming ... that's easy, too. The evening in July with Francis by the lake. ... How can I forget *that*?"

\* \* \*



"Is there ever a creature more graceful?" Roshna had said as she and Francis stared at the lake that evening, nibbling poppadom crackers and admiring the gliding swans.

"Yes," said Francis and drew Roshna into his arms. "*You*."

Suddenly the swans waddled out of the lake and approached the couple. Francis fed them morsels of his crackers until they had nibbled their fill, and once they had returned to the water, he resumed his amorous attention to Roshna.

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*"On the eighth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me eight maids a-milking..."*

"But eight maids a-milking," Roshna said, dreamily returning from her recollection and addressing Tim and Match's eager, inquisitive countenances. "Any idea?"

The two children shook their heads.

"Let me think..." said Roshna.

\* \* \*

It had been an exceptionally hot day and Roshna liked milkshakes, especially mango flavoured, and while returning home from school, she had stopped to line up at the Milkmaid, an ice cream shop. A youth in front of her was quite distraught after emptying his wallet and pockets. He was about to purchase eight coffee milkshakes.

"I was positive I had more than this, lady..."

"I'm most awfully sorry," said the cashier. "Are you sure you don't have ten quid?"

The youth shook his head.

"I do!" Roshna said over the young man's shoulder and thrust a bill into the cashier's hand. The youth turned in bewilderment, but Roshna had left the queue and was walking towards the shop's exit.

"It's my good deed for the month!" she responded to his protests.

And it had been August.

*"On the ninth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me nine ladies dancing,"*

Roshna smiled. "Brenda Nachni had so wanted to dance. ..."

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## Chapter 6

“There’s a saying, ‘I was complaining because I had no shoes, until I saw someone who had no feet.’”

“What are you trying to say, Mother?” Roshna asked. She had been preparing her school duffel bag, when her mother voiced her cryptic phrase.

“There’s always someone worse off than oneself. It helps us to be thankful, as you are finding out.”

“Shoes...” Roshna said and scratched her chin. “‘To die for’ she said.”

“Who said?”

“Brenda. ‘Barefoot’ Brenda Nachni.”

Chitrathi smiled. “The girl you gave your ten pounds to last month.”

“Yes. It’s so little—seeing that some can’t even afford shoes. I specifically told her it wasn’t to be spent on shoes, though. I gave her the money to attend a Bollywood dance audition at the Youth and Connexions Centre in Ealing.”

“The one you attended the other night?”

“Yes, and Brenda won against eight other contestants. She was *fantastic*—dancing barefoot.”

“It thrills me to see that people are meaning more to you than you realise, Roshna.”

“They do, Mother? Why?”

“As short as your life has been, your memory holds special places for those who have positively affected you. You will become more aware as time goes by. Those people will pop out of the recesses of your mind like a character on *This Is Your Life*!”

“Like who in particular?”

“The handsome young man at that wedding reception yesterday who had to remind you that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What was his name, now...?”

“Gary, er ... Mr. Bennett. Although, I wouldn’t say he positively affected me. That was most inappropriate of him to address me in front of everyone like that.”

“I think it was quite appropriate after you had been vocally wondering what the bride saw in Justin Lord. Especially considering we were there at Michael’s kind behest. Justin’s father is his boss, as you know.”

"I know," Roshna said with a curl of her lip, "But Justin Lord and his father, brothers, uncles, and cousins trussed up in tuxedos and leaping around doing that rap version of 'Get Me to the Church on Time' looked like monkeys in a zoo, in my opinion. Plus they were all extremely intoxicated. It was embarrassing for all, including the poor bride—it was written all over her face, so I gave her the ten pounds for that month. I'm not sure for what, I just felt sorry for her."

"That was so kind of you," said Match, and put her hand on Roshna's shoulder.

Roshna winced at her recollection. "Goodness, though, I was so inordinately judgmental."

"You were," said Tim.

"But you are learning," Match said with a pitying smile.



"I hope so," Roshna replied. "I am such a—"

"Listen to the carol, Miss," said Tim.

*"On the tenth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me ten lords a-leaping..."*

Roshna gaped and began counting on her fingers. "That is really something—Mr. Lord, his father and two brothers, two uncles and four cousins ... *ten*. Ten Lords a-leaping!"

"And eleven pipers piping," said Match.

"When was that?"

"The very next day," said Tim. "The wedding was on the last day of October and the couple scarpered off for their honeymoon in Gretna Green the following day. There, seein' as money were no object, they wuz greeted by a hired team o' bagpipers in kilts and escorted to their hotel!"

“But what has that got to do with me?” Roshna asked.  
“Everythin’, Miss. There wuz eleven of ’em.”

*“On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me,  
“Twelve drummers drumming...”*

Most of the time, Francis’s demeanour was stoic. Sometimes it seemed to Roshna that the only movement in his body were his dancing dark eyes. She imagined fireflies, and just a fortnight before Christmas on their customary evening stroll across the common, she had impulsively said so.

“My *eyes*, Roshna? Like fireflies?”

“My remark just p-popped out. You offered a penny for my thoughts. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? For centuries, people have paid more than a pretty penny for wise thoughts. Think of Blaise Pascal.”

“And who is he when he’s up and dressed?”

“The author of ‘Pensées’ ... French for ‘thoughts.’”

“I know that,” said Roshna. “I mean, I *do* study French in school. Anyway, I prefer to remain quiet on such matters, especially when I know little about them.”

“Good for you. ‘Even a fool when he holdeth his peace is accounted wise!’”

“You consider me a fool?”

“Absolutely not. You are intriguing, and that’s why I asked.”

“I don’t consider myself that way, Francis. I think I’m rather ... what’s the word ... *shallow*? I concern myself with the

most down-to-earth, *sinful* stuff most of the time—at least in my thoughts! They’re not as learned or lofty as the ‘pensées’ of your ... what’s his name?”

“Blaise Pascal. You should read it. But what do you consider sinful?”

Roshna sighed and rolled her eyes. “Food, for one. Umm ... sleep too, a little sports, I suppose, and my need for ... well, you know...”

“I don’t, ’cos you haven’t told me. But I wondered if...”

“Those fireflies are dancing, Francis, and I *love* it!”

Francis laughed. “Stop it, Roshna, otherwise I will never ask you! B-but can I invite you to a night out?”

“Maybe. But what happened to your commitment to the ministry?”

“That’s not happening yet.”

“So, when and where is this ‘night out’ to take place?”

“Next Saturday at the Intransit Club.”

“I don’t know,” Roshna said with an affected sigh and a mock mop of her brow. “All that repetitive, dime-a-dozen drum stuff. Don’t they call them ‘loops’?”

“Maybe the musically savvy do. How do you know?”

“Mum’s boyfriend. He explains all that stuff. It’s remarkably neat, actually.”

“Okay, but would you come?”

“Of *course*.”

\* \* \*

“There you go, Miss!” said Tim, fixing widened eyes on Roshna’s enchanted countenance. “Yer dime-a-dozen drum loops!”

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"It *was* a beautiful experience," Roshna wistfully responded. "But why am I so ... is '*blessed*' the word?"

Tim nodded. "Christmas in the 'art means all the year round, Miss. Giving, giving, and giving. Sowing, sowing, and sowing."

"And *then* some," said Match. "And that is what you did."

"But why did I never realise that each month over the past year had held such significant an experience pertaining to this carol? Especially as I had so disdained it last Christmas?"

"He works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, Miss," said Tim.

"Who?"

"God Almighty," Match answered.

"And may He bless us all, everyone," said Tim.

Having said that, Tim, along with Match and the carollers, faded from Roshna's sight.

Roshna slowly arose, and as she aimlessly wandered, it had seemed to her that the members of her visitation had been bathed in a diffused white-golden light. She was uncertain if they had actually been wearing white, the colours of their clothing had not registered with her, and she even wondered if (except for Tim and Match—after all, she *had* shaken their hands) the accompanying singers were tangible beings.

*The chauffeur, Francis, his parents and brother, the ballet, Tim and the carollers.*

It all seemed like a dream to Roshna, and as she strolled, pondering on those events, a warm sensation filled her and she suddenly felt impervious to the winter chill until a car horn beeped her back to reality. A vintage, dilapidated Morris Minor was cruising beside her.

Roshna shivered and quickened her step. The car pulled to a stop and a shabbily uniformed man got out.

"Better get you home, Miss," he growled. "It's too late for the train to Southall."

Roshna was about to scream until she recognised the man was Henry, Francis's chauffeur.

"B-but the car ... the BMW..."

"It's past midnight, Miss, and like I warned you, if I didn't get you home before that, we'll be turned into pumpkins! Looks like we have. Figuratively speaking, that is!"

"How strange," said Roshna.

"Very. And if you don't get in, you'll catch a death of a chill in that there getup."

Roshna looked down at her apparel. It was no longer the black cashmere maxi coat, just her olive-green cardigan over a pair of frayed jeans.

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## Chapter 7

“Hmm...” Roshna said as she stood up from the computer and looked out the living room window at the fog-shrouded, slush-driven street. “What day is it?”

“Sunday,” Chitrathi said with a puzzled expression. “You forgot?”

“That late hour last night must have disoriented you!” said Nandi.

“No, I meant what day of Christmas is it?”

“New Year’s Day ... that’s one, two...”

“The eighth,” said Michael as he picked on his guitar.

“Eight maids a-milking,” Roshna muttered. “I don’t see too much significance in that.”

“But New Year’s Day does represent the beginning of something new,” said her mother. “A new life.”

“True. But that’s not enough.”

“Why should it be of such concern, dear girl?”

“Oh, I don’t know. After the way this year has been going, I will be on the lookout for monthly signs!”

The phone rang and Chitrathi answered. “Uh ... yes,” she said in somewhat affected tones. “I am not entirely aware ... at *The Milkmaid*, you said? That must have been my daughter. ... Here, I’ll let you speak to her,” she said, despite Roshna’s motions of protest.

“Y-yes?” said Roshna. “That was I. I mean, *me*. Yes, I’m Roshna. How did you get this number? I see. Amazing ... okay,

P-Peter—let’s stay in touch. Thank you. Yes, and a happy New Year to you, too.”

Roshna put down the phone, her eyes wide with astonishment. “Eight maids a-milking,” she said.

“That’s quite amazing,” said Chitrathi, and arose to brew more chai. “But speaking of New Year changes, I wonder if you, Michael, can tell the children about some of our plans.”

“Well, for starters,” Michael said once he had cleared his throat, “I’m putting some of my newly gained capital towards Chitrathi’s sister’s move here to England.”

“Neat,” said Nandi.

“You must be so happy, Mum,” said Roshna.

“Yes, and there’s even more to it. Explain, darling.”

And explain Michael did. Following a divorce settlement with Sadhil Gupta, who had meanwhile found fresh romantic interest in an aspiring actress from Sacramento, California, Chitrathi and Michael were to be married in the traditional Hindu fashion.

“You don’t mind adopting the surname Ridley, do you?” he asked the astounded but delighted pair of youngsters.

Roshna and Nandi shrugged, and then beamed at the news that the four of them were to move into a house in West Hampstead.

“With an extensive garden and the heath across the road,” said Chitrathi.

“I’ve even relented, and I’m buying a Toyota 4×4!” said Michael.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said Nandi. “How did you come into all this money?”

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Michael put down his guitar, and went on to inform the two Gupta children (all news to them) that for the last couple of years, due to a decline in the printing business, he had been investing in online publication sales, which included newspapers and magazines. His speculations being fruitless, he created LIKEMIND, an online networking and collaboration company.

“And boom, the moola has been rolling in—lots of it,” he said. “I have been suddenly swept into high finance!”

“Hence a house in Hampstead,” said Chitrathi.

“It may sound opportunistic,” said Michael, “but looking into this online void of isolated individualism, I realised that there is money to be made from people’s yearning to connect on all levels—business, friendship, romance, what have you. It’s greater than ever, you know—that desire. It even seems to connect different *worlds*. ...”

Suddenly, Roshna glanced at the computer monitor and gasped. “*Tim!*”

“Tim?”

“Tim, Mum ... he was with the carollers, and they were singing ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas.’ I met him last night. He just wished me a Happy New Year on Twitter. I thought he was a ... never mind.”

“Are you talking about Tiny Tim and the Carollers?” Nandi asked. “The cool Christmas carol group who had a hit with ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas?’”

“I don’t think so. They did sing that song and it sounded a bit like them, but it was more angelic, sort of. He was with a little girl nicknamed Match, ’cos she used to sell matches.”

“That’s wild. Their big hit one Christmas was ‘Little Match Girl,’ and they had brought in a new addition to sing it. Her name was Match. What did she look like?”

“Tiny and pale,” said Roshna. “Blonde ringlets to her shoulders. A totally Dickensian waif.”

“Sounds like her.”

“Actually, it couldn’t have been them,” said Michael. “’Cos up until just yesterday the band was reported missing while flying to a Christmas Eve gig in Dublin. You know how private jets often get lost on the radar. They finally found that it had gone down in the Irish Sea. No survivors.”

Roshna shivered. “N-no, of course not. It c-couldn’t have been them,” she muttered. “And it’s odd that I hadn’t heard about all of this.”

“You hadn’t?” said Nandi. “It was all over the news.”

“I suppose I have been a little distracted of late,” said Roshna.

Chitrathi shook her head and placed a hand on Roshna’s shoulder. “This is all very overwhelming, dear. But to look on the bright side, judging by the response you have received to your giving this past year, who knows what more developments will come up. You obviously have and *will* be reaping what you have sowed.”

“Sowed, Mother? What?”

“In a word ... *love*.”

Silence fell upon all in the room at Chitrathi's remark. Michael fingered his guitar, Nandi stared at his feet, and Roshna held her breath and gulped to suppress tears.

"But that's not really me!" she finally exclaimed. "I'm a *horrible* person."

"You're not," said Chitrathi. "No one in the whole world has a better daughter."

"No one in the whole world has a better *step*daughter," said Michael.

"No one in the whole world has a better sister," said Nandi.

Suddenly the telephone rang again and Roshna picked it up. Her mouth fell open as she listened.

"And no one in the whole world could have a better ... *what?*" she whispered into the receiver. "Wh ... why ... I shall consider it. And I am sorry about last night. ... I just needed some space and time to think. I just didn't know what ... yes, of course."

Roshna shook her head, closed her eyes and after a few minutes she whispered "good night" and laid the receiver back down.



"That was Francis," she said dreamily. "He merely wanted to wish me a happy New Year."

Chitrathi chuckled. "Merely? I don't think that was all, dear. What did he say about no one in the world could have a better...?"

"A better future ... umm..." Roshna began. "Well, I think you'll be seeing a lot more of him."

"That would be nice."

"In other words, Mum, with your permission, he'd like to take me out tomorrow, and hopefully, many more tomorrows..."

The End