

LALEETA

A River-Shaped Love

Love was not the dream that called her across the flood.

Love was the hand that pulled her back from it.

LALEETA: *A River-Shaped Love*

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DEDICATION

**For my people —
for the Oraon blood that runs steady in my veins,
and for the Munda songs that flowed into my life
through my mother's spirit,
carried from the far tea gardens of Assam
all the way to the red earth of Sundargarh.

For the communities that shaped me —
the Oraon villages nestled among whispering Sal trees,
the Munda tea-tribe lines where laughter and hardship
were brewed into the same cup,
and every humble household where resilience
was not a word but a daily ritual.

For the ancestors who walked this land long before I did,
who taught us to speak to the forest softly,
to treat the soil as kin,
to honour the river as elder,
and to carry dignity not in our possessions
but in our work-worn hands.

For my mother's people,
who left forests for plantations,
who picked tea through rain and sun,
whose lungs filled with dust
but whose spirits never dimmed —
heroes of quiet endurance,
whose strength the world rarely writes about.

For my father's people,
the Oraon families of Sundargarh
who taught me what community truly means —

that no one stands alone,
that each story belongs to the village,
that courage can be found in the eyes
of those who wake every morning
to wrestle life from an unforgiving land.

For all tribal communities of our hills and plains —
Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia, Santhal,
tea-tribe, forest-tribe, mountain-tribe —
bound not by geography
but by a shared inheritance of silence, song,
and steadfast love for the land.

For the men who toil under harsh suns,
for the women who carry worlds in their arms,
for the children who dream in dialects
that echo the heartbeat of the earth itself.

For the unsung heroes
who preserve forests not with speeches
but with understanding,
who protect mountains not with maps
but with reverence,
who survive each day with grace
and face each night with unfathomed dreams.

This book is for you —
born from your struggles,
inspired by your strength,
and written in the shadow of your courage.

I dedicate this story
to the tribes who gave me my heritage,
to the people who shaped my voice,
and to the land that shaped my soul. * *

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PREFACE

There are stories that arrive as storms — sudden, sharp,
breaking open the sky.

And there are stories that come like the slow turning of a
river, carving their way through memory not by force, but
by persistence.

This is a river-story.

It does not begin with declarations of love or promises of
forever.

It begins with small gestures — a shared cup of handia, a
field tended at dawn, a river crossed in curiosity, a flute
note wandering across water like a message with no
address.

It grows through mistakes, silences, and choices made on
the thin edge between desire and duty.

For love, in the world of Gundipahar, is not a lightning
strike; it is the long work of hands, the weight of sacrifice,
the courage of stepping into a flood with no certainty of
return.

This is a story of three hearts —
one that dreamed of music,
one that longed for a different sky,
and one that stood steady as earth even when storm-winds
shook him.

It is the story of how a girl learned the shape of her own
heart.

How a young flautist realised that tenderness is not
possession.

And how a hunter who had always been feared became,
finally, a man worthy of being chosen.

If you listen closely while reading, you may hear echoes:
the whisper of Sal leaves,
the steady thrum of drums at a mahua festival,
the low song of the Tiriri river as it keeps its ancient
watch.

But most of all, you will hear the truth that lies beneath
the surface of every great love:
that the strongest bonds are not forged in longing,
but in what we are willing to give,
almost to the breaking point,
for someone who may never know the depth of that
sacrifice.

This book is not merely a tale —
it is a reminder that love is not always the flute across the
river.
Sometimes, it is the hand that pulls you from the flood.

PROLOGUE

Long before Laleeta crossed the river for the first time,
long before Ramesh lifted his flute toward the trembling
sky, long before Bhavru dove into the monsoon waters
without thought for his own breath, the river itself held
their stories.

Rivers are older than the villages that cup their banks.
They know the weight of footsteps, the tears washed in
secret, the laughter of children who believe themselves
unseen.
They know what has been lost, what has been buried,
what is destined to return.

The Tiriri had watched generations rise and fall among
the Sal forests —
watched lovers carve their names on stones,
watched widows float lamps for the dead,
watched hunters rinse blood from their hands,
watched girls look into its surface searching for futures
they could not yet name.

It had watched storms gather and disperse,
had swallowed secrets,
had delivered blessings.

But the river also knew this:
that every season births one story it will remember above
all others.

For it is not every year that a girl walks into its depths
driven by longing.
Not every year that a young man stands helpless on the

opposite bank, his heart caught between fear and desire.
Not every year that another man leaps into its fury, ready
to trade his life for hers with no witness and no promise.

The river felt their choices before they made them.
It held their reflections before they understood
themselves.

It carried their echoes long before they ever spoke.

Because the river knew something they did not yet know
— that love is not the flutter of a heart at the sound of a
flute,
nor the sweetness of stolen afternoons.
It is what remains when the water rises,
when breath fails,
when only truth is left shimmering beneath the waves.

The Tiriri had watched it all in silence.

And when the time came, it rose to test them —
as rivers do, when they wish to reveal what lies hidden in
the chambers of a human soul.

This is that story.

CHAPTER ONE

MORNING AT GUNDIPAHAR

Dawn came to Gundipahar slow as a thoughtful animal, drawing itself over the Sal-canopy in violet folds, then unfastening the world with a thin, sure light. The hamlet lay cradled where the forest thinned and the ploughed land began — a cluster of low huts whose clay walls held the dry smell of last season's smoke, whose thatch was still beaded with the night's dew. From any doorway one could look out and see the river like a strip of quicksilver threading the plain; from any threshold one could hear the small, sure music of the day beginning: the koel replying to a far-off rooster, the soft slap of a pot set down on packed earth, the far, steady cry of a plough-ox.

Gundipahar was a small place. That was not an insult; it was the truth and a kind of treasure. People there kept their living close to their hands and to one another. Paths between huts were narrow and well-worn, trodden since before anyone could name the first foot that traced them. Every morning the same hands rose to the same work: lifting water, stoking hearths, sashaying reed-brooms across smooth floors until the house shone like a palm. Work made ordinary the extraordinary — the way a bowl of rice steam could look like smoke captured in a low bowl; the way a child's laugh could sound like the river tripping over a stone.

Laleeta woke with the first real light, as she had always done. She slept on a low cot of woven cane beneath a

mosquito net that fluttered when she turned. For an instant, she lay still and let the memory of sleep unpeel itself from her bones: a dream of leaves and of a small bird that would not sit still. Then she rose. Her feet found the cool floor; the house exhaled the last of its night. Outside, a neighbour rolled a mat, another untied a bundle of sorghum. Laleeta braided her hair quickly, looping the dark rope to lie compact at the nape of her neck. A single bead, a family thing, rested at the end of the braid — not for beauty so much as for habit, a way to remember the mother who tied that same knot every morning.

She moved like a woman whose body remembered rhythm. The clay pot she lifted to her hip had the smoothness of many such vessels and the faint smell of rice-polish. Her sari — the coarse, dark cloth usual to the homes of Gundipahar — was folded neat at the waist so it would not trail in the mud. She threaded a narrow path between huts, stepping over a sleeping dog, greeting a neighbour with a nod that carried news enough for half a dozen conversations: the goat that had gone hungry last night, the child with the fever who now slept placid, the weather's soft tilt toward a dry harvest.

The river called from the distance; it was always calling, even when it did not need to. Laleeta could see its silver from where she walked, a moving line that altered its face with every hour. She and the other women took the same track, barefooted, carrying pots and laughter in equal measure. The way to the water meant passing the hill where the Sal-trees stood like patient sentries. Their trunks were black against the dawn; the leaves whispered in dry, hushed voices as if they were telling secrets not meant to be carried into the sun.

It was on this path, on most mornings, that she met her cousins and the other girls who had grown up with her. Children with bare knees chased one another; an old woman sat on a mat and rolled chapatis with hands that had learned the world by folding dough. The chorus of work rose and fell like a song with many voices — a syncopated music of exertion and small jokes. They carried baskets of sprouted paddy, a few bundles of firewood, a mat to be mended. For Laleeta there was the rhythm of it all: dip, lift, stride; again, again. The day's work was a poem, if one had ears to listen.

At the riverbank the water lay in long soft strokes, the surface barely creased this morning. Here, the village spilled into activities like grain into a bowl: women drew water, boys raced stones, hands worked grain through sieves until the pale dust rose and caught the light. Laleeta set her pot on her hip, bent with the practiced motion of someone who had done this task since childhood, and dipped the pot. The water filled the clay like a promise answered. She rose with the pot, balancing it with the easy strength of her arms, and the girls nearby greeted her with nicknames and the quick cruelty that childhood allows. Laughing, they began to braid one another's hair, to sit in the shallow and pull the river grass into simple necklaces. The day was not yet a day — it was suggestion, possibility.

There were faces that drew attention even before a person fully arrived, and Laleeta's was one of them. She was seventeen—strikingly lovely, effortlessly graceful, her skin a warm, deep wheatish shade. It wasn't because she dressed to impress or tried to be admired; it was something quieter, something in the way she held herself. Her steps had a natural ease, her shoulders carried a gentle

precision, and her laughter came only when it truly wished to—light, clear, and unforced.

People spoke of her the way one speaks of a perfect mango—its sweetness not boasted about, but understood without debate. Suitors approached her often. Some announced themselves boldly; others tried to charm her in quieter ways. Yet among all of them, Bhavru's presence carried a weight that felt entirely different.

Bhavru watched from the farthest edge of the clearing, and his gaze was nothing like the careless stares young men often give. He stood the way men of his kind naturally did—arms crossed, jaw firm—but the strength in him was more than the stance suggested.

He was twenty-seven, dark-skinned, tall, and powerfully built, his body shaped by years of hunting, lifting, and enduring the land. His complexion carried the deep shade of earth warmed by the sun. A pale, uneven scar traced its way from his chin to the top of his chest, a mark people whispered stories about—some claimed it came from a fight with a wanderer, others said it was a brush with destiny itself. Whatever truth lay behind it, the scar did not harden him. If anything, it lent his face a kind of unforgettable gravity.

There is a look that hunger for possession gives a man; Bhavru had it sometimes. But there was another side to his gaze — a quiet vigilance that belonged as much to a man who keeps the village hearth as to one who might take another's peace. He watched the girls as much to ensure no harm came as to claim what, in a small community, might be reason to raise his status. At dawn he was often first among the men to reach the threshing-floor, his hands steady, his voice the one that set the

rhythm. He would prod an ox with a stick to keep it moving right, or set a bale so a widow's crop would not fall to neglect. Wherever Bhavru was, there was a sense that things would not slide into petty chaos.

From a distance he watched Laleeta that morning, not with the heat of a hunter's lust but with an attention that felt almost like ownership — the old, complicated ownership of duty. When she stepped into the sun with the clay pot balanced upon her hip, he made a half-step forward, as though to intercept an errant breeze, or to reassure himself of where she stood, as if the very air around her might tremble and need steadying.

His watching did not go unchecked. The village knew of him; it noticed Bhavru when he moved because those who belonged to the household of the headman were always slightly larger in the village's story. Children cried out when he laughed; women muttered when he frowned. Yet there was a practical tenderness in him, surprising for one so easily mistaken as hard. It was in the way he handed a child back to its mother, in the way he lowered a sack of grain so an elderly neighbour could take it without strain. He liked the measure of things. He preferred order to melodrama. To him, love had not yet been named — but the idea of keeping, of guarding, of making a place secure for someone's life, was already present like coal beneath ash.

Laleeta, for her part, knew him well enough not to mistake his interest for kindness. She had felt the quickness of his step across a narrow path, the thunder of his moods. He had spoken to her in tones that sometimes hurt; he had also bailed water for her mother when the well had fallen low. She had watched him take a spear to

the forest and return with a caught boar; she had seen him sling the meat across a neighbour's fence without so much as a claim. His was not a single note, it was a chord — a mixture of roughness and a capacity for care that only revealed itself when it mattered.

She walked the bank with the others, keeping to the custom of women who move in groups. Children braided their hair and dared each other in small, fearless games; an old woman sang as she husked rice. Laleeta set down her pot and, with a gesture fluent as breath, began to pound the rice in a wooden mortar. The rhythm she made — up, down, the hollow ring — flowed into the morning like a metronome. The sound of mortar against wood shaped the next hour: one circle of life striking another. She worked; her wrists moved in habitual arcs. Her face, when she laughed, softened into something almost luminous. When the mortar was heavy and the sun higher, they paused and shared small flatbreads and a smear of jaggery, talking in the loosened way of those who have laboured together.

From the trees above, a koel called—its note thin and insistent. Across the thinness of the clearing someone started a drum for a child's play-acting, and a little one began a song about the harvest. There was laughter then, the hard, bright kind that comes from people who know scarcity. Laleeta's companions teased her about a bruise on her shoulder where a basket had once dragged; she defended the bruise like a small, private victory. She was not coy; she was candid. She enjoyed the life she had, the work, the small pleasures — the feel of the river's cold in her calves, the way the wind smelled of turned earth.

Bhavru's eyes followed these movements, not entirely as a jealous suitor but as a man cataloguing what must be preserved. When the mortar paused, when the girls lay back on their palms and watched a gull skein across the river, he moved closer to see if any needed help. He offered a hand to steady a pot; he said, to no one in particular, "Mind the oxen near the north field—one's hoof seems sore." His voice carried the authority of one who held a stake in the village's well-being.

To their neighbours' eyes, the scene must have looked simple: a girl at the river, a man not far off, a village in its morning. But to Laleeta, the day was already collecting meaning that would fold itself into the rest of her life like a seam. She felt, in the marrow quiet of an ordinary day, the first stirrings of something that had nothing to do with the city songs she had only sometimes heard through traveling merchants — a sense that each small movement, each measured kindness or sudden anger, would become the shape of the days to come.

The sun climbed higher. The women wrapped their hair into cloths, wiped mud from knees, and prepared to carry their tasks home. Laleeta hefted her pot and looked once toward the dark belt of trees that marked the river's farther bank. For a single instant she let her gaze drift, not in longing but in the simple habit of noticing the world beyond the next bend — the same curiosity that makes children press their faces to a fence. Then she turned and went back toward the huts, where the day's work awaited: the churning of the churn, the mending of a net, the arranging of a simple lunch. Bhavru watched her go. He did not move to follow. He stood, like the Sal-trees, patient, and, in his patience, watchful.

Something in Gundipahar always knew its own small histories even before the people did. The mortar's rhythm, the koel's cry, the scar on a man's throat — these things would be folded into story. Later, when a child asked who had loved whom and why, older voices would point to this morning and say, as if answering a small, inevitable question, that it had begun like most things there: with work, with ordinary gestures, with a man who watched and a woman who walked by the river carrying water in a clay pot.

CHAPTER TWO

BHAVRU THE HUNTER

The morning in Gundipahar had already shaken the dew from its shoulders when Bhavru stepped out of his father's courtyard. He carried his bow not out of vanity — though few men in the region could handle one as he did — but because the bow had become an extension of his own awareness, a way to listen to the world. The string hummed when the air shifted; the grain spoke when his fingers brushed it. In his hand the bow was not a weapon: it was a pulse.

His scar — the pale, jagged one running from throat to collarbone — caught the angled sunlight. In certain hours of the day it appeared almost white, like a memory someone had carved directly into his skin. Old stories hung around the scar the way smoke hangs around a fire that has already died down: was it a fight with a stranger who tried to steal a neighbor's cow? Or a drunken quarrel in his father's youth turned savage? Or the night he'd defended someone he didn't name? Bhavru never answered questions about it. He carried the mark with the quietness of a man who knew that certain histories belonged only to the body that endured them.

Bhavru was twenty-seven — not old, but seasoned in a way that gave him presence. Villagers greeted him with a mixture of caution and familiarity. Children approached him readily; men measured their tone when speaking to him; women viewed him as both a bulwark and a storm cloud. He had grown into this position without ceremony.

The headman's son was expected to be many things — strong, fearless, decisive — but Bhavru had added other qualities to the mix, ones no elder had taught him: his own rules, his own stern morality, a sense of right and wrong that did not always match the village's expectations.

On most mornings, he walked the perimeter of the village alone. He inspected the grain stacks, the cattle shed, the fence-line where tracks from the forest sometimes crept too close. His strides were long and steady, the body of a hunter tempered by the patience of a farmer. Today, as he passed the goat pen, he heard a weak bleat that did not belong to the usual morning bustle. He paused.

The cry came from behind a fallen cartwheel. A young goat, barely weaned, lay trembling with its leg caught in a twisted loop of rope. The leg was bloodied where the rope had cut into tender skin. No one else had noticed: the women were busy prepping breakfasts, the men had gone to the fields, and the children were still rubbing sleep from their eyes.

Bhavru knelt without hesitation. The goat's small flank rose and fell in panicked jerks. It tried to scramble away but only succeeded in tightening the rope further. Bhavru murmured a low sound — not quite a word, but a settling rhythm, the kind a mother gives to soothe a newborn. With one hand he steadied the creature; with the other, he pried apart the stubborn knot. The rope cut into his palm; the goat shivered violently. It took a moment — then another — and finally the loop slackened.

The goat bolted, but the injured leg refused to carry it, and it fell with a soft thud. Bhavru swore under his breath. Not harshly — more out of frustration with the fragility of living things. He lifted the goat, cradling it against his

chest. The softness of its fur, the erratic hammering of its heart, the faint metallic smell of blood — these sensations softened the edges of the scar on his throat, drew him inward.

He carried it to the shade of a low neem tree. From a small pouch at his waist, he took out a cloth strip and a bit of medicinal paste made of neem bark and turmeric. With slow, deliberate hands, he cleaned the wound, murmuring the way his mother had once murmured to him when fevers took him as a child. His jaw tightened with concern. He could be quick to anger — that was true — but his anger had directions; it did not fall on the weak.

As he worked, the goat's cries softened to whimpers. When he finished binding its leg, Bhavru sat back and looked at the creature with a long breath. He brushed a thumb down its spine, a gesture both protective and resigned. "Go now," he said softly. "Don't get snared again." The goat limped away in uneven hops, pausing once to look back, its ears twitching. Then it disappeared behind a stack of firewood.

Only then did Bhavru rise. He dusted his hands, checked his bowstring, and resumed his walk. To anyone watching from afar, he would have appeared the same: the tall, broad hunter with the hard-set jaw. But something within him had shifted into quiet alignment — the way small acts of care often align someone's inner compass.

On the path toward the Sal forest, the world brightened. Sunlight filtered through the tallest crowns, laying molten strips of gold across the ground. Bhavru walked through those strips as though passing through thresholds of memory. His father's voice echoed in him — stern, instructive: *A headman's son does not let people fend for*

themselves. But another voice rose behind that, softer, older: his mother's. She had died young. Yet he remembered how she had once cupped his face and said, *Strength is not in the hand, Bhavru. It is in the choice of when to use it.*

He carried those words like he carried the scar — close, unspoken.

When he entered the forest, he moved with sure-footed ease. Leaves crackled lightly under his feet; branches swayed. A squirrel darted from one trunk to another, its claws skittering like tiny drumbeats. Bhavru scanned the ground instinctively for signs: hoof marks, broken twigs, the faint indentation of a recent pawprint. He wasn't hunting today — not for game, at least — but for the shape of the morning, the arrangement of the land. To him, the forest was not wild; it was honest. Trees spoke more plainly than men. Rivers betrayed nothing. Animals defended only what they needed. Bhavru trusted that.

A rustle disturbed the air. He tensed — only a fraction — before seeing a young boy, Barei, running toward him breathless.

“Bhavru bhai! The elder's cow broke the fence! She's wandered toward the ravine!”

Bhavru nodded. He did not sigh, though he wanted to; trouble had a way of finding him before he finished his first task of any given day. He followed the boy swiftly, his steps silent despite his size. Within minutes they found the cow trembling near the edge of a slope, her hooves sliding in loose soil. She was frightened, her eyes wide, her breath sharp.

“Easy,” Bhavru murmured. He approached in careful increments, hands lowered, body bent slightly—an uncommon posture for him, one that stripped him of the commanding air he usually wore. He coaxed the animal away from the edge, clicking his tongue in soft rhythms. With firm hands he guided her back through the gap in the fence, then tied the broken section with a piece of rope.

Barei watched in awe. To the child, Bhavru seemed like one who negotiated with the world, not by speaking loudly but by bending risk into obedience. Bhavru only ruffled the boy’s hair before sending him home.

As the boy ran off, Bhavru leaned against a tree trunk. A breath escaped him — not tiredness, but thought. Beneath his rough exterior, under the muscles built by countless hunts and endless labour, he held himself to an unspoken code: protect the village, safeguard the vulnerable, never turn away when strength is needed. It wasn’t something he advertised. It was simply how he survived the version of himself he feared becoming.

Behind the tree-line, the river shimmered. In that shimmer, he saw a brief image: Laleeta at the bank, her pot at her hip, her braid swinging like a dark rope down her back. His jaw tightened. She unsettled him — not because she was beautiful (though she was), but because her defiance was a mirror. She walked as though no one belonged to her — and as though she belonged to no one. It was a kind of freedom he admired and resented in equal measure.

He turned away from the river before the feeling could root itself deeper.

The village waited. Duties did not delay themselves. And Bhavru, heir to Gundipahar's obligations whether he asked for them or not, walked back toward the clearing where children played, women worked, and Laleeta's laughter sometimes rose like a bell above the hum of daily life.

He walked with the same steady steps he always took — but inside him, a line had been drawn: he wanted to be the man Laleeta could trust, though he did not yet dare name what that trust meant.

Behind him, the goat he had freed limped across the yard, its shadow tiny in the brightening day.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MAHUA NIGHT

Evening in Gundipahar had a way of arriving like a long-awaited guest — unhurried, unannounced, but welcomed the moment its foot crossed the threshold of the forest. On Mahua Night the entire hamlet shifted its breath. The sun drooped low behind the ridge, and the last beams threaded themselves through the Sal branches like strands of molten copper. Smoke curled from hearths, thin as the stems of wildflowers, carrying the scent of roasting millet and warm rice. Children already danced in circles, unable to wait for the drums; their shadows leapt ahead of them, eager to join the festivities before their bodies caught up.

Mahua blossoms — those soft, sun-coloured drops the villagers prized as both sweet and potent — had been gathered in baskets since dawn. Now they lay piled in heaps near the central clearing, ready for fermenting, ready for celebrating. Tonight the handia brewed with mahua would flow like a low river; laughter would linger in the air even after the fires dimmed.

By dusk, the clearing had transformed. Torches stood upright in the earth, their flames swaying with the slightest stir of wind. Drummers sat on low wooden stools, warming their palms against goat-skin stretched tight over the drums' bellies. Women adorned one another with wildflowers—bright hibiscus at the hairline, tiny white blooms tucked behind ears. Men straightened their vests; boys practiced the stomping footwork they had seen their fathers perform.

Laleeta arrived with her cousins, the edges of her sari lifted so she could walk without catching thorns. Her hair was braided and pinned with a single mahua blossom; it glowed pale gold against her dark plait. She carried no ornament besides the bead at the end of her braid, yet she drew eyes the way flame draws moths — not with ostentation, but with that simple presence she couldn't disguise. Her friends tugged her by the hand toward a cluster of women who were preparing for the first dance. Laleeta laughed, her voice bright enough to startle a sleeping bird from a nearby tree.

The drums began — first a low heartbeat, slow as smouldering coal.

Then a second drum answered, quicker, sharper.

Then a third layered itself like a pulse beneath a pulse.

The clearing woke.

Bodies moved. Feet stamped the earth in unison, sending faint tremors through the packed soil. The men's dance was angular and strong, mimicking the movement of hunters stalking prey. The women's dance was softer in the beginning—circles opening and closing like the petals of a night-blooming flower. Laleeta joined her circle, her bangles clicking in a rhythm that blended with the drums. Her steps were sure, her posture straight, her face lit by torchlight. She danced the way some people breathe — without thinking, with an ease that revealed pieces of herself she did not know she carried.

Bhavru arrived later, as he always did, appearing just as the drums reached their full heat. He pushed through the crowd with the casual ease of a man who knew he belonged wherever he set his feet. His broad shoulders cut a clear path; the torchlight sharpened the planes of his

face and softened the scar at his throat. Some men greeted him with half-nods; others looked away quickly — respect or fear, neither clearly separated.

He wore no special adornment besides the amulet his late mother had tied around his neck years ago, the cord now darkened by sweat and weather. A child tugged at his vest asking if the dancers needed more space; Bhavru ruffled the boy's hair and made room without barking orders. That was his rough charm: stern in posture, unexpectedly gentle in small gestures.

He took his place at the edge of the circle, arms folded, watching the dancers as though guarding the boundary between celebration and the forest's unpredictable dark.

The men beside him prepared to join the next dance — a vigorous number requiring leaps and heavy foot-stomps. One young man stumbled as he tried to adjust his ankle-string. Bhavru, without rolling his eyes or throwing a remark, bent and tied the string properly, tightening the knot with a quick, efficient motion. "If it loosens mid-dance, you'll twist your ankle," he muttered. The boy murmured thanks, cheeks warm with embarrassment.

Moments later, an elder woman carrying a basket of dried mahua tripped on a root hidden under loose soil. Before she hit the ground, Bhavru's hand caught her elbow. "Steady, Mausi," he said.

His voice was gruff, but his grip careful.

He held her until she regained balance, then lifted the basket and carried it for her to the brewing hut without waiting for applause. The old woman, touched, whispered a blessing after him.

Laleeta, spinning lightly with her circle, caught only glimpses of Bhavru in between turns — a silhouette made strong by torchlight, a hand steadying someone, a quick step forward to nudge a stone out of a dancer's path. But even through her movement she felt the weight of his gaze. It did not burn with the crude hunger she had seen in other men during festivals; his gaze was too layered for that — firm, intent, unsettling because it saw too much.

Once, as her circle widened and the dancers scattered, she found herself facing him for a flicker of a moment. His eyes held something like possession, yes — but threaded with something she had not expected: worry. The sight of her dancing seemed to pull something taut inside him, something that had no name. Her heartbeat tightened in her chest. She looked away quickly, unsettled.

Her cousins noticed.

“Laleeta,” one teased, nudging her shoulder. “Your steps faltered.”

“Did someone catch your eye?” another chimed in.

Laleeta laughed them off, though her pulse had not yet steadied.

The drummers shifted into the festival's most beloved rhythm — a quick, rising beat that made the ground feel alive beneath bare feet. The men and women joined in a shared circle now, interwoven, moving like petals caught in the same wind. Bhavru was drawn into the dance by force of expectation; even he could not refuse when the drummers themselves motioned him in. His movements were powerful, unrestrained, a rhythm shaped by hunts, storms, and long days with a spear on his shoulder.

For an instant, his path crossed Laleeta's. They did not touch, but the air between them tightened, charged. His presence brushed close like a wall of heat. Laleeta's steps faltered again, just a fraction.

Bhavru noticed — not with triumph, but with a flicker of something unreadable.

The dance ended in a roar of applause and laughter. Handia flowed in clay cups; the torches burned lower, their flames trembling like small dancers of their own. People settled on mats, legs stretched, sweat drying on their skin.

Laleeta sat with her cousins, the taste of fermented rice warm in her mouth, her breath still quickened. Her eyes drifted — against her will — toward the shadowed corner where Bhavru stood drinking with a few hunters, head bent toward their conversation but his gaze flickering toward her more often than it should.

Something about it made her uncomfortable.
Something about it made her curious.

A breeze lifted the edge of her sari; the mahua blossom in her hair released a faint, sweet scent. She inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to shrug off the strange sensation rising in her.

It was not fear.

It was not attraction.

It was something more complex — like the recognition of a question she did not yet know how to answer.

Across the clearing, Bhavru finished his drink, set the cup aside, and leaned against a pillar of Sal wood. His scar

gleamed pale in the firelight, and his eyes found her once more.

Mahua Night stretched onward — drums softening, voices warming, the air thick with sweetness and the promise of stories yet unwritten. But for Laleeta, the night had already shifted. The rhythm of the dance still pulsed in her bones, but deeper than that was a new rhythm — uncertain, unwelcome, and quietly blooming.

Bhavru had looked at her, truly looked, and the village festival seemed suddenly too small for the questions that glance had awakened.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLOUGH AND SOIL

When the mornings grew steadier and the monsoon's first tremor had passed into the memory of the land, Gundipahar moved as one breathing body toward the fields. The village, which at other times seemed a handful of houses scattered by habit, now organized itself around a single pulse: the rice. Transplantation called—an endless, exacting ritual—and every pair of hands knew its part in the choreography.

Dawn found Laleeta already awake, not by the clock but by the work stored in her bones. The air where she lived smelled of damp earth and the faint, sweet yeast of fermenting mahua; the sky held the thin blue of a promise. She ate quickly—flatbread torn in two, a smear of jaggery—and set off with the women. Their path to the paddy was a narrow ribbon through waist-high grass, the tracks made by old feet lined with tiny wildflowers. The oxen that pulled the plough were still home, lolling in the shade, their breath soft as small drums. Men had ploughed the first furrows the day before; now it was time to young, to plant.

Rice transplantation was a work of rhythm. The method was careful and repetitive: kneel, plunge hands into the wet black, take a clump of sprouting seedlings, open the water with a foot to make space, plant the green like a small promise. Songs rose and fell across the field to keep time—deep, round chants from the older women and quick, laughing refrains from girls like Laleeta. The

melody was not ornamental; it was an instruction. It told hands when to lift, when to rest; it held bodies together against the weight of the sun and the pull of the mud.

Laleeta moved through the rows with a competence that was almost speechless. She planted with a certain economy of motion—a hand went down, seedling placed, fingers smoothed. It was work that demanded patience and exactness as much as strength. Her knees sank into cool slurry; the water lapped the hem of her sari and left it heavy at the waist. She laughed when a cousin splashed her, and then set her face to the rhythm again. Elder women watched her from the bank—men too, when they paused to adjust oxen—and their eyes softened with recognition. She was good at this: quick, careful, tireless.

The elders' approval arrived in small things. An elder woman, Paroma Mausī, who had led transplantations for decades, clapped her hand against Laleeta's shoulder when Laleeta finished a long row without pause. "You hold the line well," she said, voice a dry rustle. "Keep the seedlings neat, child, and the field will feed many mouths." The praise did not inflame Laleeta; it settled in her like cool water. She had no desire to be noticed for more than her skill, and yet being seen—truly seen for labour done well—left an aftertaste of quiet pride.

Near the threshing floor Bhavru had stationed himself that morning. The men were breaking the earlier harvest, pounding stalk against plank, tossing grain so the wind might take the chaff. Bhavru supervised with the same exacting manner he brought to every community task. He was not a tyrant; he was a man with a plan shaped by a sense of stewardship. If a boy shirked, Bhavru would be there to place him back at work with an easy reprimand.

If a woman's bundle needed lifting, he would, without fuss, bend to take part of the weight. His authority came as much from competence as from birthright.

When petty boys from a neighbouring hamlet came near—boys who liked to test limits by teasing women or scattering seedling bundles—Bhavru's shadow fell across them like a wall. He did not shout. He moved. One of them, a wiry boy with a grin too wide for the morning, threw a clump of mud toward the women as they bent to plant. It splattered against Laleeta's back and down her sari. The boy laughed. The sound was small and ugly among the field's broader noises.

Bhavru walked over. He did not raise his voice. He placed himself between the group and the women with a deliberate, cavernous calm. "Enough." The single word landed like a plank across a stream. The boys wilted under it, their bravado melting. The tallest of them, insisting on his joke, stepped forward, mocking, and Bhavru's hand came up—a quick, controlled motion that merely took the boy's shoulder and guided him away. There was no spectacle. The act itself was the spectacle: strength without spectacle, force contained. The boys left, sullen and smaller.

Laleeta straightened and dabbed mud from her skirt with a measured hand. Her cheeks were flushed—part from sun, part from the suddenness of the interruption. She looked at Bhavru not with immediate gratitude but with a complicated expression: appraising, cool, slightly wary. The exchange between them was not a flaring of romance but a calibration—two people measuring edges.

Bhavru caught her eye, then looked away, returning to the men with instructions about the rate of pounding and the

placement of the grain. He listened to the elders' concerns—the future supply, the pests on the eastern edge—and answered with short, practical solutions. At one moment he moved to steady a youth on a wobbly stool, adjusted the angle of a plank, and then walked on. The motion suggested both competence and a lack of show. He did things that made others' burdens lighter, subtly, without fanfare.

Throughout the day small tensions threaded the hours. Laleeta and Bhavru's interactions were like stones in a slow-moving stream—sometimes visible, sometimes submerged. They spoke when necessary, trimming the edges of conversation to practicality. When Bhavru suggested that the irrigation channel needed a small redirection to prevent a low patch from drowning, Laleeta frowned. "We'll lose the plants on that side," she objected. "The soil there holds the seedlings deeper. If you change the flow, the roots might not take."

"I have checked the bank," he replied, slow. "It will not drown. It will only steer a little, and the scare will pass." His tone implied experience; his eyes implied certainty. Laleeta's brow creased. The matter ended in a compromise—small stones piled along the edge to guide the water—and they returned to their tasks. Neither smile nor apology passed between them; the air was dense with something else: mutual stubbornness.

At midday the sun pressed down in a thick, molten way. Women came out of the paddy to eat and to rest, their movements a study in deliberate economy. They sat on mats, peeled off wet saris and shared food—hot rice wrapped in banana leaf, a smear of salt and jaggery—and laughed in that low, whole way that only survivors of hard

work can. Conversation skittered from gossip to instruction to memory: a lost child found, a sow who had gone missing, stories of rains that came early and fields that laughed.

Bhavru walked among them and spoke briefly to elders, and then to the children, and then to Laleeta. He asked, in a voice gentled by midday heat, whether the western ditch might be widened another span. He spoke not to assert, but because the land required it and he intended to act. Laleeta looked at him, the line of her jaw softening for a moment. He had a way of speaking that held the air like a curving hand—commanding but not unkind.

The older men at the corner of the threshing floor watched them with a kind of careful interest. They noticed subtleties: the way Laleeta straightened when Bhavru spoke, the ridge of concentration that crossed his brow when she disagreed. Old men kept records in a different ink—the ink of weathered faces and long memories. To them this was a possible future brewing; not a tale of sudden love, but the slow accretion of mutual regard.

After the meal the work resumed. The field seemed to move as if corrected by the sun's arc. Laleeta returned to planting with renewed vigour: her hands were quick, precise; she set each seedling with a tiny, almost sacred gesture. Sometimes a child would come to the edge and watch her, jaw open; she would ruffle the child's hair and hand him a stalk to play with. Her competence was not prideful; it was a kind of devotion.

In the late afternoon a storm threatened from the west—clouds rolling like a tide. Men adjusted the ploughs, tarps were readied, and the village found its quick, practiced order. The threat of rain made every motion urgent.

Bhavru walked ahead of a group, directing who should work faster and who should take the livestock inward. When he looked back he found Laleeta on her knees, her hands sank to the water, her face set in the line of work. He nodded once, a small acknowledgement.

It was in such moments—compressed, businesslike—that the true features of both of them emerged. Bhavru's quick temper remained a part of him; yet it was a tool, directed, not hurled. Laleeta's independence remained unbowed, but she felt the authority of his decisions when they aligned with reason. They collided on practical things—on ditch widths, on who should haul what load—but not in ways that cut deep. Their friction was more like the rubbing of two pieces of flint that sometimes sparked and sometimes only smoothed.

When the rain finally broke, it did not storm with the monsoon's heavy hand but with a fierce, short burst that angled across the field and left the leaves beaded and shining. People laughed—the rain had come in time. They gathered grain under shelter, made tea, and stood watching the field take on a wet, shining calm. In the shelter of the threshing hut, Bhavru and Laleeta stood near enough to hear one another's breathing but not so near as to cross a line. He handed her a cup of tea—no flourish, only the practical kindness of a man who saw a task and supplied what was needed.

She took it and drank. The tea was warm with jaggery and a bitter edge that matched the rain's abruptness. Her eyes met his. For a second, the world narrowed—mud, grain, the drum of rain—and then widened again into the ordinary now: the work that required them both.

The day closed with the sound of poles striking planks, the last of the seedling rows finished, and the sky clearing to let a washed, tender light settle over Gundipahar. Women laughed and began the evening rites; men patched tools; children chased one another in the newly slick paths. Paroma Mausī came up and placed a hand on Laleeta's shoulder again, her eyes bright with a small, approving moisture. "You did well," she said, and Laleeta felt that affirmation deep in her chest.

Bhavru lingered at the edge of the clearing when most had gone home. He watched the women return with bundles, their silhouettes small against the lowering sky. When Laleeta finally walked by with the last of her basket, he called out, low and careful, "Tomorrow, at first light, check the eastern bund. We'll set posts before the next watering."

She looked at him, weighing the instruction against the memory of her own stubborn plan. For a fluttering breath she might have refused. Instead she nodded. "I will," she said.

The nod was small. But it was something: a concession that was not surrender. They both understood the shape of the exchange—a necessary union of wills for a season's sake. Love had not been named in that nod. There was no confessional heat, no flash of passion. The intimacy was rougher and truer: two people who could count on one another to do what must be done, even when their tongues sparred.

As the last light drained from the fields, the village folded into itself. The ploughs were rinsed, the oxen led home, and the women gathered their seedling baskets for the night. Laleeta walked the path back to her hut, her feet

heavy from the day but steady. She felt mud between her toes, the day's small ache in her shoulders, and a quiet satisfaction. In the dark beneath the Sal-trees Bhavru's figure receded—he turned back toward his father's house, the amulet heavy at his throat.

Work had been done. Things were righted for now. In the small, measured exchanges of the day—tying knots, saving goats, steering waters—an unspoken ledger was being kept. Each act, small and necessary, logged itself into the ledger of the village and into the ledger of them both. It was not romance. It was, perhaps, the raw scaffolding upon which something steadier might be built, if time allowed such work to finish.