

The
Quicksilver Saga

DARKER THAN SHADOWS

BOOK ONE

Kamalika Mukherjee

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To my muse...

*All the good deeds I do
All through the day
I do it for you*

*All the motions I go through
All the things I say
To make people laugh
All the good deeds
That I do
I do it for you...*

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*I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought
how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.*

~ Virginia Woolf

1

Morning Blues

Sprawling across her favourite pillow, I watched Ila lazily through half-lidded eyes. I was not ready to get up yet, naturally. Ila, on the other hand, was running around like a headless chicken.

It was perfectly normal, however, as was the voice of Amy Lee belting out “Lost in Paradise” into the still and aerosol-filled morning air of a Kolkata autumn. To a casual observer, it would probably look like her movements lacked any cohesion or purpose, but there was a method to this madness. There was a morning ritual involved. It started with her tumbling out of the bed and turning on the decade-old Sony Powerhouse with her eyes still closed. Coffee was a hasty affair with milk, sugar and instant coffee powder unceremoniously dumped into a cup and placed into the microwave oven. By the time it dinged, she would have managed to brush her teeth, still sleep-walking about in frayed pyjamas like a demented sloth. Breakfast consisted of granola bars or milk and cornflakes, both of which she hated with her entire being, but cooking so early in the morning was out of question.

Finally, she would stand in front of the mirror, grim and fully dressed and start the epic morning battle with her long, waist-length hair. Well, she seemed to have got to that point early on today and right now the scoreboard looked somewhat like this:

Hair versus Ila: Round 1

Hair: 1 Ila: 0

Ila scowled at her reflection as Troye Sivan crooned softly in the background. I almost sighed, meaning I had the urge to sigh. It was a human thing, but I understood the feeling. I never got the logic behind listening to sad songs to try to heal a broken heart while its effect seemed to be the exact opposite.

Mandi Perkins began singing about castles and cobwebs and I had to admit that the lyrics probably resonated, that was if you were a lovesick twenty-year old nursing a broken heart. If you asked me, it was a bit too heavy for a Monday morning. Case in point, it had Ila staring gloomily into the mirror for the past five minutes. Suddenly, she turned round and peered over her shoulder, lifting her right arm above her head. The movement had the hem of her top ride up to reveal the small birthmark just above the waistband of her jeans. Ila obviously didn’t share my opinion that it looked like a tattoo anyway. She frowned unhappily at the dark hexagon.

Now, this was just pathetic. I yawned and regarded her, silently judging her wardrobe choice. It was a shapeless, lime green top, a gift from her ex-boyfriend, the one who had recently dumped her via an SMS! The one who surely featured in the sepia-tinted fantasies Ila was having while listening to these trauma-inducing songs. The gift alone warranted a break-up, in my opinion, except for Ila should have been the one sending out the all-is-over SMS.

With a defeated sigh, she finally stopped obsessing over the stupid mark and faced the mirror again, absently smoothing down a non-existent wrinkle in her dress. I thought she was over that joker; well, apparently not.

“Meow,” I said.

She looked at me questioningly. “What is it, Shadow?”

Yeah, she talked to her cat and I would always desist from rolling my eyes for hey, who was I to judge? I, sometimes, tried talking to the bloody lizard on the wall when I got too bored.

“Meow,” I piped up again. Well, I do admit to possess a rather limited amount of vocabulary, but I thought I got the message across just fine.

“You don’t think I look alright?” Ila’s face fell.

Oh man, have some self respect! I wanted to smack her upside the head. She was actually asking if a cat approved how she looked. Well, come to think of it, this could be expected to happen to a girl who had been left to fend for herself even before she had turned eighteen. Both her parents were always running off to her elder sister with whom Ila had been unfavourably compared throughout her life and found wanting. I had witnessed the family sitcom featuring the indifferent parents and an extremely delusional Ila ever since she picked me up from the sidewalk six years ago. I was sick and tired of it by now. I just wished Ila grew out of her shitty childhood already for I had had enough of the heart to heart talk that she insisted upon having from time to time.

“Meow,” I wanted to shake her out of the self-pity fest. She sighed again (loads of them going around this morning), slung her faux leather satchel across her body and stroked my head lightly before heading out.

2

The Bower

I knew, intellectually, staring into the mirror would not solve any problem in my life, but screw that, who listened to the calm voice of reason at seven o' clock in the morning anyway.

"You are not plain," I said to my reflection. The girl from the mirror stared at me, profoundly unimpressed.

"You are not unwanted or unloved or un-anything," I tried again.

"Yeah, right," the girl said. Suddenly, the reflection twisted and flickered. I blinked and the reflection was same as ever again—plain, boring, old me and nothing but me. I blinked some more.

"There is something wrong with the lyrics," My reflection spoke again while casually examining her nails like she was bored with this conversation already. Well, story of my life; even my own reflection was bored of me! But then, I tilted my head and listened.

*There was a world of shadows deep
All shadows had secrets to keep...
Battle-lines were drawn upon the sands
Bugles called in oceans and lands...*

I frowned and my reflection did the same. I was absolutely sure from the start up music that it was "Castles" by 'of Verona', one of my favourite bands.

*She walks the path in between
She acts her part and says her line...*

I didn't recognise the lyrics at all, though the tune seemed familiar.

"Because it is playing in your head," the reflection pointed out sagely. She was probably right. She looked like somebody who would know of such matters.

Great! Now I was having a conversation with my damn reflection on top of having some sort of mental breakdown for sure. That would explain the auditory hallucination. Wait, if it was auditory, would it still be called a hallucination?

I shook my head and attacked my hair again. What the hell was the use of growing out my hair if I could not make it look effortlessly sleek as most of the girls at my workplace did? To hell with it, I finally gave it up. At least, the dark jeans were not making my ass look fat (I hoped).

I checked if my birthmark was showing if I lifted my arm too high. Yes, I was unfortunate enough to have a birthmark placed strategically low, so that it would show whenever I wore a short top along with my low-slung jeans, exactly as I was wearing right now. I sighed and grabbed my purse, ready to step outside. As because I was a loser who just wasted time staring at the mirror for some godforsaken reason, I was running late. Naturally, I was all breathless rush as I made a hasty exit and promptly bumped into Akki.

“Good that I ran into you,” he beamed. “I have—”

“No,” I said, resisting the urge to point out that he quite literally had run into me.

“I haven’t even asked anything!” Akki protested.

“The answer is still no.”

“Fine. As if I need your permission anyway.”

“Permission for what?” I asked warily. After all, Akki did have a knack of honing his (frankly non-existent) flirting skills on me and this would probably be as good a time as any to mention that Akki was only fourteen.

“I am going to serenade you tonight,” Akki replied solemnly with the palm of his right hand pressed against his heart and all.

I looked heavenward for help, but of course none came. “Why do you want to scar the alley cats for life?” I asked aloud.

“Ila, you do know, right, that one day I’m going to save you from a gruesome death when somebody kidnaps you for a ritual sacrifice or cuts your fingers one by one and sends them to your parents as trophies,” Akki said patiently, like he was talking to a five-year-old.

I stared at the boy for a couple of seconds. “You are one disturbing kid,” I finally declared. Akki merely shrugged in answer. “Or you have been watching Dexter again.”

His eyes bulged. Hmm, gotcha!

“Don’t tell mom. I have been streaming it on Magnus.”

Magnus was Akki’s laptop (yeah, he was one of *those* kids who named their gadgets) which was almost an extension of him, given the amount of time he spent on it.

“Isn’t that kind of illegal?” I asked.

“Who cares? Besides, it’s hot to be an outlaw.” I started to open my mouth. “Don’t even try to deny it for Jack Sparrow is your favourite.”

“And the fact that you actually know that is, again, vaguely disturbing,” I shook my head at the precocious child. “Now shoo,” I said, cuffing him lightly on the head. “I am going to be super late if I miss my bus.”

Akki grinned and waved a good-bye while I started power-walking towards the bus-stop. Akki reminded me of my family. Wait, that was not quite it, because I seldom missed my family. There was a sense of loss, but I was not sure it stemmed from missing my parents who had been conspicuous by their absence in any case during most of my adult life. Even when I was surrounded by my family, something was always missing and I couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

When my elder sister left Kolkata, I didn’t even feel a thing. We were practically strangers, moving into different friend circles, having completely different hobbies. I mean, my sister was awesome, being a surgeon and all, but I never quite got her. I never tried to.

When mom and dad left for Switzerland for good to live with her, I was kind of relieved. It was better this way, to be truly alone. At least, there wouldn’t be anybody knocking at my door if I played music until three in the morning or complaining when I rolled in my bed until noon during my week-offs.

So, here I was, living alone in my parents’ house. Well, not quite alone, if I counted Shadow. It was difficult not to think of Shadow as a person. I talked to him. I discussed all serious, life-threatening situations in my life with him: from an eruption of acne to my numerous heartbreaks and everything that fell in between. He was usually a good listener and sometimes, when I was being particularly silly, he gave me this look that held so much chastisement that I suspected he would actually begin to talk any of these days. I wondered if in his head, he already did.

Today, he was yowling at me furiously when I was wasting my time in front of the mirror. I guess he knew how important my job was to me and how much I had been trying to prove myself, though to whom I was not quite sure. My parents surely didn't care much. It was not my self-pity speaking; it was the truth. What was a 'glorified housekeeper' (their language, not mine) to a doctor or an engineer or at least a school teacher! Still, it mattered to *me* if to no-one else.

Anyway, I was doing an internship at a five-star hotel after graduating from the hotel management school. I had high hopes from this programme. On second thought, to describe the Bower only as a five-star hotel was a gross understatement. To any intern of hotel management, working at the Bower in any capacity would be a dream-come-true, because it was the oldest and most famous hotel on this side of the world. Unfortunately, the Bower was only a means to an end to me. Don't get me wrong; I was not immune to its charms. I simply did not have the luxury of being enticed by its grandeur. I was more interested in the Bower as my employer.

The hotel had taken elitism to a psychopathic level. By their standards, I would probably fit into some quiet back-office, away from the spotlight, where I could be my usual inconspicuous self. Now, that was one compromise I was not ready to make. I wanted to apply for a front desk job from where I would hopefully get a shot at being promoted to the executive manager level. I would be seen and heard and would no longer stumble through my life invisible. I would wear the beautiful, custom-made uniform with a brass name tag. I would join the palms of my hands and welcome the arriving guests with a confident smile on my lips.

"I may be wrong, but I don't remember the invisible man checking in," somebody spoke up, making me nearly jump out of my skin. Looking up I saw him, casually leaning against the wall with his hands tucked into the pockets of his trousers, smirking. "But then again, who knows, since he is invisible."

"Huh," I said eloquently.

I didn't remember seeing him before. He was obviously British, going by that cut-glass accent. A hotel as renowned as the Bower had its fair share of foreign nationals among its staff and I couldn't expect to know every one of them. He appeared to be from the front desk and quite high up in the ladder at that; a front office manager, going by his attire. Of course he was! I always thought the dark suit with satin lapel and crisp white shirt were too formal to make a very sexy combination. Never, ever would I doubt the power of a suit from now on.

The guy was very tall and I had to practically drag my unwilling eyes up to meet his eyes, because (shit)...because (I realised only now) I was kind of checking him out. I quickly fixed my eyes on his face and he grinned, showing perfect, white teeth. Then, he pointed a finger towards my hands which were still together. I jerked them apart and held them firmly by my side.

Wow, now that I had managed to half convince him I was mentally unhinged, it was high time that I moved on to actual words!

"It's not polite to eavesdrop," I tried to sound cool and unperturbed with the emphasis on *tried*.

"I was not eavesdropping," he countered. "I was merely pointing out that you were talking to the walls."

"Oh that." I stomped down the urge to scratch my head sheepishly. "Yeah, that...might seem strange."

"You don't say," he drawled.

"I was doing some stress management exercise."

Seriously? Could I just dig a hole in the ground and disappear while at it?

"OK, fine!" I huffed, pretending to be irritated as the man simply arched one dark eyebrow in response. "I...have a precognition that I may soon be placed at the front desk."

Oh joy! Now, I was a blathering idiot and a lying one on top of that.

"Precognition, huh?"

"It is a proven phenomenon and quite common in fact," I bristled. Yup, definitely the time to start with the digging right freaking now!

“It must be true if you say so.” The stranger’s smile turned placating. “May I know the name of my soon-to-be-colleague?”

“Ila,” I croaked. What? Stop! You are not going to be his colleague. Tell him the truth. “My name is Ila. Who are you?”

Well, there went my coolness, straight out of the fire escape.

“You should know since *you* are the one with freaky psychic ability,” he quipped. Before I could take offense and open my mouth to protest, he simply bulldozed over me, “Good that I know your name now. Don’t ever come near the front desk area and even if you do, don’t come after six. Our shift starts at six.”

With that he turned on his heels and walked away. Before disappearing down the corridor he casually threw over his shoulder: “Also, don’t ever ask for anybody called Robin.”

I was too stunned to say anything but after a few moments a slow smile spread across my face. I knew I was looking even stupider than when I was caught saying *namaste* to the invisible man, but I could not wipe it out. Nor did I care that the opener used on me was probably the dumbest I had ever heard. I wouldn’t try to go comparing intelligence after being reduced to a blabbering fool just because a hot guy happened to smile at me.

The front desk! Must it be the one place that held all things interesting to me?

3

The First Encounter

I was trying to think of a way to loiter around until six even though my shift ended at 5.30.

"I swear I am going to kill Deshai one of these days." The sudden exclamation made me jump again. I sighed internally. Also, I would have to ditch Ri, who took the subway with me on our way home.

"Hey," I stopped her, "what's the matter?"

Ri's real name was Sohini. It was probably fair to call her my best friend even though we met less than half a year ago when I joined the Bower. We hit it right off the bat and further sealed our sismance with a drinking binge at my place (one of the perks of having a house to myself) accompanied with ice-cream sundae, Will Smith movies and the customary bitching about the management. The same night I drunkenly ended up rechristening her and it stuck. She was Sohini to everybody, but she was my Ri. She was not an intern like me, but a full-time employee and she was with housekeeping. With a face as pretty as hers, she should have been at the front desk, if only she had a college degree. As is the case with many other pretty girls like her, who are inexplicably attracted towards hoodlums, Ri had fallen in love, left home and married Shiva, a local ruffian, all before she had turned eighteen. With her family practically disowning her, she was stuck with a job she hated and with a bully of a boss in the form of Deshai.

"I am going to murder him," she declared again.

"Yeah. I got it the first time." I tried to calm Ri down. The management had eyes and ears everywhere. Deshai was the eyes and ears of the management and he had a creepy way of sneaking up on people without them ever noticing it. "What did he do?"

"The jerk has assigned me to toilet cleaning," she said tightly. "Again."

"What have you done this time?" I narrowed my eyes at her.

"Nothing." Ri glowered at me.

"Is it a similar 'nothing' like when you poured a glass of champagne over the bridegroom's head last week?" I asked innocently.

"That guy...he was groping my ass!" she spluttered.

"Oh, I think he was hoping you would return the compliment. Besides," I pretended to steal a look at the said ass, "can't say that I blame the poor guy."

"Go to hell." Ri shoved me lightly, though her lips were twitching.

"Absolutely not!" I laughed, shoving her back. "Deshai might be the doorkeeper there."

"And will give you toilet-cleaning duties."

"If the devil every poops." We grinned at each other. A cute, young housekeeping staff, who was walking in front of us looked over his shoulder fearfully and crossed over to the other side of the hallway.

I heaved a sigh. This was why I was never going to have a boyfriend and would die of old age with twenty cats surrounding me.

“Do you think...” suddenly, Ri’s face turned serious.

“Do I think what?” I prompted.

Ri bit down her lower lip. “Don’t you think it’s a bit strange that he would assign me to duties which would have me spend more time with him, given the fact that he is always yelling about how incompetent I am?” She ranted.

“It is kind of strange and gross, if he is trying to stealth-date you that way.”

Ri looked like she was about to puke and I completely empathised with her.

“Hey,” I nudged her with an elbow. “You still carry around the mini pepper spray can I gave you, right?”

“The best birthday gift ever.” Ri patted the pocket of her uniform skirt.

“Well, don’t be afraid to use it.”

“Looking forward to it, in fact,” Ri gnashed her teeth.

“That’s my girl.” I smiled at her.

“Thanks for the pep talk and see you at 5.30.” Ri bumped my shoulder.

“Isn’t Shiva picking you up?” I deflected, not wanting to confide about the mysterious guy at the corridor just yet. The deflection worked as Ri, who had left Shiva after his third arrest and had been staying at a working women’s hostel for some time now, promptly flipped me the bird.

“You might as well give up. He is going to win you back eventually.” Not that I had a lot of sympathy for Shiva, but the guy had been trying hard to stay clean and he had been holding one job for the last six months, not a mean feat for him. I truly believed he really loved my friend, if the way he looked at her was any indication, but Ri was still pretty mad at him.

“He is never going to win me back,” she declared haughtily.

“Not for lack of trying though.” I shook my head. “The guy stands outside the hotel for you practically every day and the only thing he hasn’t done is going down on his knees.”

“Yet,” Ri muttered.

“OK, I will let Shiva know.” I giggled. “But the kneeling and begging doesn’t quite go with his biker dude persona.”

“Ila,” Ri huffed exasperatedly. I held up my hands in a gesture of surrender.

“I am staying out of it. As it is, I have an inventory duty now.”

With that we parted ways and I headed towards the basement where the dry store was located. I stood in front of the steel racks with a notepad fastened on a clipboard and a pen. I exhaled loudly and started with the grains and cereals. I was about to move on to the sauces, but then I stopped. Something was wrong. I recounted the tins of extra virgin olive oil, cross-checking it with the previous entries in my notepad which I made nearly a week back. There should have been six tins on the shelf. I counted them again. There were only three of them.

Had I not been so engrossed into my thoughts, I would probably have noticed him earlier. But as it happened, I did not and I shrieked in panic when something soft brushed against the bare calves of my feet. Looking down I almost dropped the tin of olive oil I was holding. Standing right there, in the middle of the store room of the damn hotel, regarding me with knowing eyes was a feline who I had no doubt was Shadow. I would know that grey, furry ball of temper with golden, disdainful eyes anywhere. Also, a British shorthair was not exactly a common sight in Kolkata. But, it was utterly impossible!

“Meow,” the cat said, as if to challenge me. I closed my eyes and counted to ten in my head, willing the apparition to go away. When I opened them, the cat was still sitting on the floor, tail whipping to and fro and looking right into my eyes.

Eerie!

“Shadow,” I whispered. My voice sounded hoarse. The cat probably lost interest in me and started to move away.

“Shadow!” I called out again.

The cat paused at the door and looked over his shoulder. I opened the door and mutely followed him as he padded out of the store-room and walked down the corridor until we were standing before a seldom-used washroom, the one which almost always had a 'wet floor' sign placed in front of it.

The cat reached up and pawed at the door and I felt compelled to hold it open for him again. The familiar beige walls greeted me. I glanced over the wall fitted mirrors, the row of basins gleaming like ivory under the concealed lights and the dark brown doors of toilet booths. A faint, spicy smell wafted in air from the potpourri in a glass bowl placed at one corner. Everything was just as it should have been and I didn't know why I expected otherwise in the first place.

"Meow," the cat suddenly exclaimed as he leapt agilely on the marble countertop.

"Hey," I started forward. "Get down from there."

The cat showed no sign of obeying. Instead, he settled down there and got busy into cleaning his face with his front paw.

"Look, buddy..."

The door suddenly flew open and a housekeeping staff stepped inside carrying cleaning supplies in her gloved hands. It was not Ri, but one of the newer girls.

"Hey," she greeted me.

"Hey," I said, "look, I found a..." I broke off, staring into the blank space where the cat was sitting half a second ago. "...stray cat." I mumbled stupidly.

"What?" She raised her eyebrows. I stared some more and then exhaled through my mouth.

"Um...never mind." I smiled woodenly at the housekeeping girl and returned to the store-room trying to fight down a deep sense of unease.

The rest of the day was uneventful and I had completely forgotten about Robin by the time my shift ended. During the entire twenty-minute walk from the hotel to the subway station (a daily exercise which I took voluntarily everyday) I was mulling over the appearance (and the consequent disappearance) of the strange cat. When I finally remembered the stranger from the front desk, I was already standing on the platform waiting for the train. Ri had been detained by Deshai for what would be the third time this month, making me feel guiltier for my plans to ditch her.

Somebody jostled me. It was six in the evening and the Central was brimming over with homebound crowd. I found an overhead air vent and stood under it. I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling of cool wind brushing against my clammy forehead, and let my mind go blank. Whatever, I thought, I would deal with it tomorrow. Right now, I would go home, order some Chinese food and watch a B-grade horror movie on my laptop. Or I would probably listen to R.E.M. the entire evening. Today, I felt like listening to R.E.M.

"Stop her!" Someone yelled behind me.

I opened my eyes to see a middle-aged woman in a blue *saree* crossing the cautionary yellow line drawn along the edge of the platform as the train was pulling in. I knew what she was about to do. I had read about it countless times in the newspaper. I instinctively reached out for her only to grab on thin air. The train screeched to a halt a couple of seconds too late. I was not sure but I thought I heard the sound of bones crunching. There was probably one stunned moment of silence and then the screams began. The train backed up slowly. Some people stumbled forward in morbid curiosity.

"She was probably electrocuted instantly before the train crushed her," somebody muttered into my ears. I spun round, incredulous. What did it matter how she died? It was a horrible death!

"She did not suffer." I recognized the voice belonging to the person who had shouted out earlier and he was eyeing me with kind, knowing eyes. Then, we both stared in front. They were recovering the body from the tracks. We flinched in unison. I ducked my head and started walking, having seen too much already. I stopped at the foot of the escalator and looked up. Then, I could not move:

A woman was standing motionless on the metal steps of the upward-moving escalator. She looked familiar, the way her bun was resting wearily at the nape of the neck, the way she had draped her *saree* around herself to cover her back, the *saree*...the same blue *saree* and the same back of which I had a fleeting glimpse a few minutes back when she had jumped in front of the train.