

The
Blue
**JADE**

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CHAPTER 1

Hong Kong

Fate has a way of turning every aspiration to shreds. Fate will also damage every possible pathway to a goal. In fact, having a purpose in life is of no use, because one way or another, it will all amount to nothing. The whole point of existence is to suffer, since destiny chokes all positives from life.

That was the perspective with which Neelam Bhatia existed. It was an edge-of-abyss kind of drudgery, melting and merging one dreary day with another. The weight of her emotions drained her to an extent that she often wished she could simply stay in bed and not have to face her feelings. And when she had to face the day, she wished she could just scream at the top of her lungs and let the world know how terrible she really felt.

Friends and colleagues advised: 'Be grateful! Be thankful!' Neelam wanted to ask them: 'For bloody what? For living a fake life?' The overly preachy quotes grated on her nerves. She stopped reading them on her WhatsApp messenger and disconnected herself from other social media platforms. Neelam preferred to delve in the dark dregs of despair, the inky feelings; they were black wells of comfort. She wallowed in

the fog of grief, indulging and immersing in it for hours. She basked in the memories of pain until she was still like a corpse.

Her inner world was a black space but her outer world, quite the opposite. She wore a mask of a normal, well-adjusted woman with a job to do. Her outer veneer was in contrast to her inner self. She was locked in a role and played her part well, an inherited condition.

It was her karma, some said—a cause-and-effect conditioning. The cause was a mystery from a past life sin for which she had to suffer in this life. It was the karmic blues of her existence.

The irony was that she was an empowered woman, born in the twenty-first century, a millennial, with the freedom to be and do whatever she wanted. She had everything working in her favour until karma gave her a real gut punch.

Neelam, therefore, merely existed to play a role in this life. She would do this fake stuff until... who knows... another sixty years or so. Or until death claimed her through disease or murder or accident. There was hope.

Neelam strode into the five-star-hotel at precisely 12.30 p.m. The lobby had a grand central floral display and a crisp, citrusy aroma filled the air. She entered the lift and pressed the button for the fifth floor. Inhaling deeply, she checked her appearance in the elevator mirror. Her medium length hair was dark brown and fell neatly around her shoulders. She hadn't put in much effort to wear make-up but social presentability required some basics; it was part of the act. She had applied the bare minimum—brown eye-liner, peach-coloured lipstick and a hint of blush. She was glad that the clean lines of her skirt-suit hid her thin frame. High heels, confident stride and a smile pasted on her face ensured she exuded the right attitude of positivity and empowerment for a woman in her late twenties.

The Blue Jade

At the entrance to the ballroom, she was handed a name tag which she clipped to the collar of her jacket. The chandeliers glimmering from the ceiling made Neelam blink at the crystal brightness. The carpet was a rich burgundy with a geometric gold-coloured motif. There was that familiar aroma of orange spice in the air, meant to lift spirits. As soon as she stepped into the plush room, she was greeted warmly by Mrs Sharma, the chairman of the Golden Businesswomen's Group, or GBG, as everyone referred to it. Their monthly luncheons were at posh hotels and were organised to make excellent use of the generous annual membership fees paid by the mostly retired, well-heeled women of the group, well-heeled being the key term. Neelam was invited to be the guest speaker for this month's GBG event. She mingled with the ladies, smiling graciously and handing out visiting cards. She received as many in return, which she carefully placed inside a leather holder in her handbag.

Waiters glided about with trays of champagne flutes and tiny canapés. Neelam conversed with the ladies, discussed current affairs, money matters and political opinions, or whatever else they were interested in. The murmurs of conversations increased as more GBG members entered the venue. After about twenty minutes, the gong sounded and everyone was requested to take their seats. There were ten round tables, seating eight each. Neelam was invited to sit with the chairperson at the head table. While she ate, Neelam mentally packaged her talk that she was scheduled to deliver before dessert. While she politely conversed with the lady on her left, she recalled her father's advice: Be like a chameleon and fit in wherever you go; that's the secret to success. Neelam was glad she had inherited his genes. Her father was a soldier before he turned professor. He had always said that it was better to die a hero than a coward. Face your enemy head-on, go down fighting and never give up or give in. Neelam had suddenly lost her appetite.

After the third course, when the waiter whisked away the last plate, it was time. One of the committee members stepped up to the podium and tapped the mike, which worked fine. She introduced Neelam Bhatia, referring to her as a humanitarian and, like her parents, an art expert specialising in Indian artefacts and antiquities, owner of a prestigious art gallery in the heart of Hong Kong. Her gallery had been home to multi-million dollar artworks and exhibited many upcoming artists. ‘And lately, Neelam has been working towards a philanthropic goal which she will tell you about. Please welcome this dynamic young lady.’

There was a round of applause.

Neelam walked up to the podium. She thanked her host, smiled at the roomful of expensively attired women sipping on six-hundred-dollar bottles of wines. She guessed the combined net worth of the women in the room would easily exceed two billion dollars. Neelam glanced at her notes and then faced the GBG members with a self-assured gaze. She started with the requisite greetings and appropriate references to the chair and committee members for this wonderful opportunity to speak to such an elite audience.

‘I must tell you a story of true love.’ Neelam smiled as her audience perked up. ‘You wonder why I choose to mention a love story when the topic is about supporting the less fortunate. It ties in together and I will tell you why. My favourite childhood mythological figure has always been Mirabai.’ She saw some of the women nod in recognition. ‘This particular tale sets my heart on fire. It is about the princess-saint, Mirabai. She was a rebellious woman, one who defied all social customs, threw away her life of luxury and the safety of a palatial home, to wander the streets as a vagabond, lost in her world of love. She was a bold female, ahead of her times,’ Neelam said. ‘Quite a rebel for her day!’ She heard titters and nods. ‘I wondered how

anyone could totally detach themselves from all that luxury and comforts for a love so unachievable. Yet, Mirabai loved with all her being, with every thought and lyrical word. And her every action towards the poor, towards the hungry, towards the suffering was one of compassion and kindness. She ignored her family's concerns about her royal status and stepped outside the boundaries of the palace to meet the poor and needy. She didn't hesitate for a moment because she knew her beloved Lord Krishna was with her at all times, and he would be pleased with her.' Here Neelam paused for effect.

'Imagine if that kind of passion existed now. If there were thousands of Mirabais today, imagine what kind of world we would have.' The function room was quiet. 'It would change the world. Every needy person will have a saviour, the sick will have a compassionate caregiver, and the orphan child will receive support. That is the power of love. And that is what I come to ask of you here. To show me your power, your magic, your magnanimity in ensuring that our organisation can reach out and help every single person who needs our support.' She paused again.

'More specifically, we are focusing our energies to provide jobs for the destitute. So this will be a barter. Whatever you give as charity, we will give back to you in a product or service.'

She gestured towards the pile of leaflets on each table. 'Please take a look at the flyers. There is a list of items that are hand-made by women. Our organisation has created a support system to ensure that the destitute have some form of employment, for which we provide training and education. We want to ensure that women in small towns and villages who have minimal education are capable of becoming independent. It adds to their sense of self-worth when they can supplement their husband's income. Many husbands and fathers have incomes tied to loan sharks. They live below the

poverty line. And in such households, the sacrifices are made by women and children. Let us join hands to work relentlessly towards the health, stability, education and security of women and children worldwide. If women are independent earners, they will be able to survive on their own. Each month, we will import hand-made items that are created, directly or indirectly, by these women. We wish to encourage them by buying their products. Women are capable of achieving greatness if given the right opportunities,' Neelam smiled and added, 'I request you to help make this happen. We depend on your generous support. We are excited about what the future holds. Thank you.'

The applause was encouraging, and Neelam offered a smile and slight bow to show her gratitude. 'I am happy to take any questions.'

A tall woman wearing a black suit with a pink scarf raised her hand. She was handed the mike. 'Hi, Neelam, my name is Karen Matthews. I have just one question.' Neelam encouraged her with a smile and nod.

Karen said, 'Your concept and premise to support the low-income families is quite interesting. Usually we offer a lump sum to feed the starved, or clothe the poor, but here we are looking at monthly instalments towards your charity, which is wonderful. In return, your charity offers us sculptures, pottery, even aromatic oils or Ayurvedic cosmetics. They seem very good, but are these products tested and approved by a regulatory body?'

The audience murmured in agreement.

Neelam nodded again. 'You are right in your concerns about the extent of our charity. Are the products produced and sold by these small businesses properly approved by the Consumer Board? Yes, we have ensured that all the products go through a testing process. Every single item carries a stamp of approval

by the relevant authorities to ensure that those we help are secure and those who are buying are not receiving shoddy products. We have worked with sister organisations in Brazil, West Indies, South Africa and in parts of Asia. Their experience and knowledge have given us an edge to foresee any potential issues and overcome them. For example, there was a case of a particular aromatic oil that caused an allergic skin reaction. We found an alternative use for the product... diluted with water, it worked as an organic insect repellent spray.'

There were murmurs of appreciative words.

Neelam continued. 'These are just a few of the issues we have addressed. Currently, we need funding to help two hundred destitute women who have lost their families and homes in a devastating earthquake that occurred recently in north India. They have the skill to create amazingly beautiful sculptures and we want to help them sell these overseas,' Neelam said with earnestness. 'Any other questions?'

A lady raised her hand and the mike was passed to her. The woman was well-groomed and carried herself with elegance. She wore a long jacket with a Chinese collar and her hair was tied up in a neat bun. Her designer jacket probably cost as much as one of the ceramic jade vases in Neelam's gallery. The lady spoke with a distinctly British accent. 'Hello, I'm Shefali Shah. Slightly unrelated to your talk, Ms Bhatia, I am curious to know how you chose the name of your charity: Karmic Blues Foundation? What is the story behind Karmic Blues?'

Neelam took a moment to answer. Her face clouded and she looked at her audience with a morose expression. 'It is to honour my twin brother. As a teen, he started a band called Karmic Blues. He passed away from an overdose of painkillers. He was very dear to me...' Neelam's voice wavered. She looked at the GBG members with wet eyes. 'That's why, with his memory, Karmic Blues was created and is a registered charity

both in India and Hong Kong. It was his dream to create fusion music that would drive away the blues from people's hearts. He said karma is about cause and effect, and he wanted to spread love and happiness all around. I intend to do the same. Every hand-made item that you will receive through us will carry the essence of his dreams.' Neelam paused as if it were difficult to express herself any further. She spoke slowly. 'My brother was a very sensitive person. He had a generous heart and could not bear to see anyone hurt. In the same spirit, I request you that each day, do your best to bring a smile to someone's face and add some joy to someone's life. Thank you.'

Shefali Shah smiled sympathetically. There was a momentary silence and then a deeper applause. Neelam noticed the chairperson looking at her with genuine regard. The women all seemed eager to choose from the line of products promoted by the Karmic Blues Foundation. Many ladies agreed that Neelam had created a wonderful opportunity for destitute Indian women and they suggested meeting in small groups on a regular basis. Neelam informed them of an exclusive exhibition at her art gallery. Her office would send them the details personally, she said. 'Besides the charity products, my next shipment of rare and valuable artefacts will be coming in soon, and I shall arrange a private exhibition,' Neelam added, referring to her art gallery collection. She thanked everyone and left the ballroom.

Outside the hotel, the oppressive heat immediately fell upon Neelam. She queued up for a taxi. There were three people waiting ahead of her. Neelam reflected on her talk, which had gone as planned. She had drummed up enough emotion. She had effectively made up the brother story; it was a fabrication to tap into the GBG's heartstrings, and eventually their purse strings. Neelam didn't feel any remorse for lying. Life had played games with her, and she played back. It was the karmic blues effect. Neelam tapped her heels impatiently as she waited for a cab.

The Blue Jade

A few minutes later, she hopped into one and the cool interior immediately offered respite. After she told the driver the address, Neelam fished out her sneakers from her bag and removed her stilettos. While she changed into her comfortable shoes, Neelam's cell phone buzzed. The message asked for an update.

She responded: *Mission accomplished.*

CHAPTER 2

Neelam paid her fare and hopped off at the traffic lights at Hollywood Road, crowded and jammed because of roadworks. She jogged to the sidewalk. It was the middle of April and the air was thick. The sky was covered with a pale grey layer of clouds raising the humidity levels to 95 per cent. Neelam made her way up the slope, around the corner, and down through narrow alleys. She slowed as she eased her way down the inclined street through the popular bar and restaurant zone. SoHo was buzzing with activity. The prime location was peppered with tiny restaurants and trendy shops. Neelam turned right to a steep curve and hurried down towards Peel Street, which connected to a narrower lane bordered by traditional Chinese shops selling dried fish, roots and berries. She continued still further down. There were two large fruit stalls blocking a narrow alleyway, easy to miss if one wasn't looking out for it. She squeezed past the stalls and walked a few steps into the path. She approached a wall that led to a plain black metal door. She waited in front of it. A hidden security camera was fitted discreetly on the wall above. The door clicked open. A tall Chinese man opened it an inch and ushered her inside. He closed the door behind her. She was plunged into darkness. The man turned on a small flashlight and as her eyes grew accustomed, she followed him down carpeted steps. The lower

section opened up into a square area. It was designed as a bar. The walls were cleverly camouflaged with dark red curtains. There seemed to be no window or another doorway visible. There were four sets of luxurious sofas, arm chairs and low tables, and the bar took up the whole rear mirrored wall. The space was deceiving; she guessed the room was bigger than it actually appeared and there would be hidden doorways and security cameras.

‘Welcome, Neelam!’ a lean Asian man dressed in a snug suit smiled pleasantly at her. He had a round, friendly face, a jolly demeanour that hid a ruthless disregard for priceless artefacts.

Neelam shook his hand. ‘Mr Kan, there are many women interested in the latest shipment. And I am here to give you their contacts as promised,’ she said as she took out the bunch of visiting cards from her bag and placed them on the table. ‘This is what you asked for. I shall also forward their emails to you.’

Kan skimmed through the cards. He seemed pleased. ‘No one suspected your purpose?’

‘No one,’ Neelam said cryptically as she maintained an expression of calm. The four armed men standing alert were overwhelming in the dense room. ‘Mr Kan...?’ she said impatiently.

Kan gave a subtle nod. One of his men took out an envelope from under the bar counter. He placed it on the table. Neelam opened, checked, and placed it inside her jacket pocket. She stepped away.

Kan’s voice was commanding. ‘Ms Neelam, you will be informed of the next plan and exhibit. Needless to say, you will remain as cautious as possible.’

‘You have no reason to doubt,’ Neelam responded.

‘You are an integral part of our set-up, just like your parents were. It is very crucial for us to keep up this route. If you do anything out of the ordinary... you understand the consequences.’

Neelam wasn’t fazed by his repeated threat. ‘I will do what is expected as long as you follow through from your end. Mr Kan, if ever there are any suspicions, it will be because of you, not me. I expect you will mobilise the charity drive in India. I have to deliver the orders to the GBG,’ she added smoothly.

‘You will get the promised packages,’ Kan said in a curt tone. ‘We will have an exhibition at the gallery soon. I expect the GBG members will attend. You will put in a good word.’

‘Yes, of course, I have given them a reason to come.’

‘Let me know when the shipment arrives. And prepare the documents as usual.’

Neelam nodded and then turned away. ‘Goodbye, then.’

‘There’s one other thing...’

‘What?’ Neelam asked, pausing mid-step.

‘There might come a day when you will have to travel to India.’

She turned to glare at him. ‘Never ever will I set foot on that soil!’

Kan muttered, ‘Never say never.’

Neelam hurried up the stairs. She pushed the black doors, but they wouldn’t open. She frowned at the guard, who pressed a buzzer and the doors clicked open. Neelam exited from the suffocating atmosphere. Beads of perspiration slithered down her face and neck as she made her way uphill towards her home on the Mid-levels incline of the hillside. She felt the weight of the envelope in her right pocket. She had an official

The Blue Jade

arrangement for which she received ten thousand dollars in cash. Kan had his reasons. And Neelam had hers.

She picked up a sandwich-and-salad combo from the M&S eatery and headed towards Staunton Street. This was the most popular maze-like area in SoHo and her apartment building was wedged between a coffee shop and a restaurant. She buzzed open the steel gate and headed inside the narrow entryway. Climbing to the first floor, she used a key to enter into her 567-square-foot rented flat, cheap because of the noisy location and the old construction. The size was good enough for her; she paid her rent on time and there was no trouble. She was one of many in a sea of expatriates living in the area. Neelam was as invisible as she was required to be. She had to be careful in her field. Solitary life was intentional, as friends were troublesome social interruptions. She was in no mood for trivialities. A harsh, disciplined approach to daily life was an ideal way to keep a balanced mindset. Sometimes late at night, when she couldn't sleep, she burnt her memories with a vigorous routine of Thai boxing. When her muscles screamed from the pain, she was able to fall asleep, exhausted.

She dumped her handbag on the kitchen counter and opened the fridge. Gulping an entire half litre bottle of water, she took a deep breath to calm her erratic thoughts. First things first! From the vegetable drawer, below the bag of choysam, Neelam pulled out an opaque plastic bag. She stashed the envelope of money inside, quickly placed it back in the fridge and shut the door.

Her mobile buzzed. It was a message from Vinod Kapadia, the art detective from India. *We need to talk.*

What's wrong? Neelam typed back, irritated.

The blue jade Krishna...

What about it? That damn thing haunted her life. She wanted nothing to do with it.

I know where it is.

Shit!

Neelam was trembling. She stared at nothing in particular, her thoughts on a distant past. It was two years ago when her life had turned upside down. She recalled the chain of events that had led to this moment. Her body shuddered; she slid down and sat on the floor, knees folded tightly to her chest, arms taut. She squeezed her eyes shut. The incident was fresh in her mind...

It was at a time when life was secure. She had a promising career path in antiquities research and recording archaeological finds. One afternoon, Neelam had returned home from one of her archaeological travels to Cambodia. She had brought back a small Khmer artefact, quite unique in its heritage. She wanted to display it and decided that the glass cabinet in the living room would be ideal. She shifted her grandmother's large Mirabai statue to make space for her Khmer piece. Mirabai was old, slightly chipped and yellowed with age. As Neelam gently lifted it aside, a clink from inside the statue caught her attention. What secrets did Mirabai hold within her?

Khmer artefact forgotten, Neelam carried the sculpture out of the glass cabinet. She shook it gently and heard the distinct sound of a solid object inside. Something must have broken inside; it was an old piece that her parents treasured because of her grandma. Neelam shook it yet again and realised the sound was in the wooden piece reverently held in Mirabai's lap. She placed the statue on the table and pulled at the wooden stringed instrument. The pressure of Neelam's touch broke it. She placed the wooden segment aside and peered inside the ball-shaped hollow end of the stringed instrument. There was something there. Carefully, Neelam tried to feel it out. It was a hard, smooth object that she got a grip on and pulled it out. It clattered on the table. Neelam froze wide-eyed, shocked at the flash of azure. 'What is that?' she murmured to herself.

The Blue Jade

She never expected to find anything so uniquely beautiful. The stunning piece was a Krishna pendant. But it was no ordinary pendant; it was a deep cerulean blue. Neelam picked it up and studied it carefully. The relic was made of jade, not the commonly seen green variety. This piece was intricately carved with such attention to detail that Neelam was amazed at the skill of the artisan who had created such delicate etchings.

Even without appraisal, Neelam could tell this was a rare piece; it would be extremely valuable in the art market. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. With the help of her father's magnifying glass, she studied the piece carefully. It was perfect; no chipped edges, just the tiny hole through which one could loop in a string to wear around the neck. This particular jade artefact must have had Chinese origins. Jade was not popular in India; idol pendants were never made in jade, usually silver or gold. Neelam recalled that at a recent auction, a pale greyish-white jade figural pendant had sold for over two hundred thousand US dollars. Blue jade was equally extraordinary, and rare. Neelam's heart thudded excitedly. She had to tell her parents about this discovery. With her cell phone, she took a few pictures of the relic. The colour was so striking it reminded her of the iridescent shades of peacock feathers.

Browsing through her father's bookshelf, Neelam found a hardback that explained the Chinese history of jade. The milky bluish figure was from the Shang dynasty era. The Shang jade was not typically green. Neelam returned her attention to the Krishna pendant. 'Where did you come from?' she wondered. A quick search on the internet gave no record of such a piece. Neelam recalled that according to Indian history, many Chinese monks had visited India in the 4th century BC in search of Buddhist texts. Is it possible that the jade pendant was presented as a gift to Chandragupta I, one of the maharajas of the Gupta Dynasty?

a family friend. He managed to get seats on the next flight to Delhi. Karuna hustled and bustled about, threw a few clothes into a trolley bag and placed the Krishna pendant tenderly inside a velvet pouch and deep inside her handbag.

‘What’s going on? Tell me!’ Neelam insisted. They refused to explain until she put her foot down. ‘Please. What’s all the urgency? I’ll ask others if you don’t tell me.’

‘No! You must not speak about this to anyone,’ Manohar said adamantly. ‘This is a rare and ancient piece, a family heirloom that got misplaced... We need to return it to where it truly belongs.’

‘Why do you have to rush? Where does it belong? Who will meet you? How will you get it there?’

‘We’ve spoken to a man named Vinod Kapadia. He’s a specialist in ancient artefacts, an art detective for the CBI. He will have the information we need. He will guide us,’ Manohar said.

Karuna looked at her with seriousness. ‘We must return this pendant to its original location. The patrons of the Rana Sangha Collection have protected this artefact for generations in their palace. They were the caretakers of this piece. It is not our fault that it went missing...’ Karuna bit her lip and clutched her daughter’s hands. ‘Make sure no one knows about this. If anyone asks, just tell them that we have gone to attend a conference. And don’t mention to anyone about this artefact at your workplace either, okay? Don’t even search for it on the internet. Okay?’ Karuna looked at her worriedly. Neelam nodded. She had never seen her mother this apprehensive.

Neelam nodded. ‘But... why so much secrecy?’

‘This is something very valuable. It was not supposed to come out of hiding. We will tell you more about it when we return. There’s a history behind it, and it has been...’