*Lock and Key*

**5:30 am**

The frayed rags, haphazardly placed on the window grills on my 4th birthday because the lightning was scaring the other children, were doing a horrible job at keeping the glaring sun out. It had failed miserably back then, it was failing miserably now. The sun's rays crawled up my right leg, that right now was hanging low from my top bunk, and gnawing at my shoulder.

“Indu. Indu. Indu. Wake up or else Ammi is going to walk in through the door,” Umrao slaps my leg from the lower bunk.

Flitting my leg back up, I pulled the white sheet over my head, “Go away, Umi!”

“Tell this when Ammi comes”

“Ok! I will!”

Umrao strutted out the door - or rather the tattered red curtain gifted to us by Papa’s brother when we moved in.

“INDUMATI SABEEN TORRES!” The booming voice was a bolt of lightning through my chest. I shot up and hit my head on the rough part of the ceiling. Every. Single. Day.

“Yes Ammi! I am awake!”

“You better be!”

Sleep was not an option anymore. A yawn escaped my mouth but I quickly rubbed my eyes, stretched my back, and shook myself up. Quickly jumping off the rickety bunk bed, I made my way to the bucket we kept in the corner of the room. The water was cold. I shivered as I splashed the water on my face, “Fucking mornings.”

“What you said? Should I come?”

“Sorry Papa!”

“The water is not going to wait for you, Indumati.”

“Right, Ammi. Of course it won’t.”

Umrao peeked through the curtain beckoning me to walk faster. The faster we leave, the faster our job begins, and the faster it ends, “Are you ready?”

I am not.

**6:00 am**

The c*hawl* we have made our tiny little world in is a 3-floor building with 10 apartments, 2 bathrooms, and 1 long hallway on each floor. The public tap and bathing areas for the men were in the backyard of the building. My heart pounded as Umrao and I made our way from our 2nd floor, 1-bedroom apartment to the public tap. Tripping almost 3 times on the way, I had managed to not wake anyone up yet. Umrao on the other hand performed her saintly morning ritual.

“Sorry Rao Aunty. Sorry Zoravar Bhai. Sorry Numair. Sorry Mendes Uncle. Sorry Prerna Didi. Sorry- ”

“Umi! Zoravar Bhai is not really our brother and Prerna Didi is not our actual sister,”

“Shhh. Don’t tell like that! This chawl is our family. 20 years we have called this place our home”

“Sweetie, you’ve only called this ‘family’ your home for 9 of those years.”

“And you for 19”

“Still more than you. And anyway sometimes we need to hurt our family to keep ourselves happy.”

“We are thieves. Shashtri Ma’am taught us in class.”

“Water is every human’s birthright.”

“Then why do we have to steal it?”

It is getting hot.

**6:15 am**

“This is stealing.” Umrao’s voice cut through the humid air.

Rummaging through my jacket’s pockets, I had found a Rupee 1 coin, a scrunched up ticket, a stick of gum, and the watch I had nicked last night. But the thing that was most needed at this exact moment was nowhere to be found.

“People who steal are thieves, Shashtri Ma’am said.”

I turned around to see Umrao staring blankly at her shoes, twirling something around with her short, stubby fingers. It was like asking a puppy to kill a bee but I stretched out my hand anyway, “Umi, hand it over to me.”

Her face sunk even lower, and she furiously shook her head.

“Umi, hand the key over to me right now sweetie…”

“No I won’t.”

“Umrao Albert Torres hand the key over to me right now or I will give you such a slap you’ll go crying back to Ammi. And when she asks what happened and you tell her she’ll also give you one tight slap!”

Words never mesh well with anger. Anger takes over words. It forces them out of hidden parts in your throat and hurls them at the people around you like stones - only words leave deeper wounds. An 11 year old doing to another the only thing she’d learned to do well.

Slowly, she opened her palms and whispered, “But we’re thieves.”

“You better listen to me carefully. Better a thief than a disappointment”.

“What is more disappointing than having a thief for a daughter?”

What is more disappointing than having a daughter?Straightening up, I opened my mouth to explain why we do the things we do and why this *chawl* isn’t her school. But I was robbed of the chance when a shrill voice resonated behind us.

“Well, well, well! Look what’s happening here!”

My heart was in my mouth as I turned around, begging that it be anyone but her.

“Shashtri Ma’am,”

Shit.

**6:25 am**

“What are you two doing there? Huh? In the corner, like worms?”

“Shashtri Aunty! Nothing at all! We’re just waiting for the tap to open!”

“It’s Shashtri Ma’am for you, Indu.”

“Yes, of course! Sorry Ma’am,”

“Sorabh Bhai never comes before 8:00 o’clock to open the lock. So why are you here 1.25 hours before? Just to wait? You think I’m fool?”

“Actually Shashtri Ma’am, we know this blacksmi- “ I pulled Umrao back and shut her mouth with my hand.

“Yes, Ma’am. Just waiting.”

“Go wait at your home.”

My heart sank, as I stood transfixed - a 5 year old listening to the music of her father’s belt for the first time. The block I stood on was an opening to the underworld and I wasn’t standing anymore. Just falling.

“Indu!”

“Huh!?”

“Come on, come on. Go home and wait!”

“Yes. Yes Ma’am,” I walked ahead, Umrao on my right, the empty bucket on my left, and lines on my forehead.

A lanky, 6-feet tall, red-in-the-face Numair was racing towards us, “*Meri jaan*!”

“I’ve told you not to call me that!”

“Uh, aren’t we narcissistic? That wasn’t for you. It was for my lovely Umrao *jaan*!”

“Awww. But I’m not your life!”

“Of course you are Umi! You are my *jaan*!”

“Ok! Stop flirting with my 9 year old sister, you creep,”

“Dirty mind, see Umi?”

We started climbing the dirt brown stairs leading up to the red curtain, a red carpet beneath me. With every step, my heart’s drumming grew louder. The space in front of me seemed to dissolve like going underwater without holding your breath first and eyes wide open. My foot missed the next step and a gasp escaped my mouth. The empty bucket swung and hit the peeling wall. The drumming grew louder.

“Indu!”

“Huh!?”

“Are you ok?”

I raised my left hand and Numair’s eyes grew wide. He quickly came close, kissed my lines away, and whispered, “Don’t worry.”

“I don’t anymore.”

“Indu,”

“Now what happened Umi?”

“I’m sorry.”

The drumming and I stopped, “Umrao Albert Torres. Do not ever apologize when you are not wrong.”

Umrao wrapped her petite frame around me, “You are no thief.”

I am still a daughter.

**6:40 am**

The cracked, wooden doorframe creaked in front of us. The monsoon Bombay breeze trotted past us. It beckoned us to saddle up and race to the sunlight.

“Want me to come in there?”

“I won’t even let Umi come in there.”

“Yes, but Umi is nine. Maybe if I’m there- “

“You think that would stop him? His own wife couldn’t stop him.”

“Hey, you’re not alone.”

“Kartik wasn’t alone either. Didn’t stop them from shooting him. Mendes Uncle was alone. Didn’t stop him from hanging himself. Alone or not, no one here ever lasts.”

“We will.”

My cheeks flared pink- a 14 year old sealing the lock on her first kiss, carving her initials into her wooden desk besides a declaration of teenage love. Six years later and the declaration is now an all-knowing wink, a smile even under the stormy cloud, still brimming with love.

“Indu!”

“Huh!?”

“Indumati! Is water here?”

“Leave!”

Numair shuffled away, swiftly unlocking the house next to his and stepping in, but not before winking and throwing a kiss - of course, to Umrao ‘*jaan’*, his ‘life’,he mouths.

“No. No Ammi.”

My mother rushed to the door, almost tripping, “What do you mean?”

“Sorry.”

“Allah! That thug will come only at 8 to open the lock. This whole bloody c*hawl* gets 20 minutes to fill their buckets for the day! If he finds out, he will get his goons to shoot us just like Kartik. You know all this, right? Day and night I am working to keep this house going. What did I pay 100 Rupees to a blacksmith for? What else I can do? I spent 100 Rupees to get a key made to put around my neck or what?”

“So sorry, Ammi.”

“No, no, no, my *jaan*! Don’t tell sorry! This house won’t get the day’s water even if you tell sorry!”

We stood there in the hallway, the wind was picking up and the clothes that were drying on the ropes started to flail. A red *dupatta* started to fly away. The red scarf flew higher and higher, not stopping for once, it’s sight set on the heavens. Maybe, that’s what I’m doing. Maybe I’m not falling but flying, flying to the heavens. Flying into a storm cloud? No. Then where?

“Indu!”

“Huh!?”

“Who’s mistake?”

“What?”

“Was it you or was it this idiot? Or was it me? The biggest idiot for trusting that my daughters could get the day’s water for this house? Allah cursed me not once but twice. What else I was expecting?”

“Actually Ammi I took the k- “ I tightened my grip on Umrao to silence her.

“It was my fault, Ammi… I - I fell on the stairs on the first floor and so, um, Shashtri, yeah, Shashtri Aunty came out and - and sent us back… Sorry.”

“Don’t tell me sorry. You only have to bare punishment. Come in now… Albert! *Aaj ka paani nahi aayega*!” With a voice as calm as a reporter reporting the hundredth death in a flood, my mother passed on my crime to my father. Swiping at the bucket, she hurried back inside- before seeing the judge make his descent to declare the punishment.

“Go to the bedroom and don’t you dare come outside.”

“But Indu- “

“Umi, promise me.”

There’s not a thing, a single goddamned thing, that will stop me, for even a minute from making sure that my sister is untouched by all the stones this c*hawl* and this house hurls our way. I will not let her be anything else but a bird - even if I, myself, can’t fly.

“Mother promise,” I kissed her small, round head and she scuttled inside.

My breaths became heavier. I looked to the house next to us. We will. We will last. But will I? I opened my palms and the scrunched up note - our ticket to the heavens seemed a lost cause. This life was all I’d ever known and all I ever will.

The sunlight scathed the right side of my face; all plans of racing were cancelled. I looked back inside as Umrao’s white *salwar dress* disappeared behind the tattered red curtain. Turning away was not an option. But my legs suddenly stopped functioning as legs should - instead they were steel pipes. Passing blood through but still unmoving. The watch was ticking.

“Indu!”

“Huh!?”

“What your mother is saying?”

I took a step in. It was time to fly in the storm cloud. It was time to face the music.

(1954 words)