

KARNA & BHANUMATI

The Untold Love Story
BOOK 1



Shriram Iyer

PROLOGUE

The flags on top of the chariots fluttered in the wind. Sunlight bounced off the armours the brave warriors wore, shining right into their eyes, but their resolute gaze did not waver. They waited for the carnage to commence. The lull that foreshadowed the bloodbath would come to an end sooner or later. They waited.

Arjuna, the third Pandava brother, gripped the *Gandiva* bow with newfound clarity and purpose and stared hard at the vast Kaurava army in front of him. But something still didn't fit. Krishna's words of wisdom should have dispelled every morsel of doubt in his mind, but the embers of unrest within, remained.

Duryodhana, their arch nemesis, and one of the biggest reasons for the war, had been late in taking his place in the line-up of the Kaurava army. Arjuna studied his cousin, his sworn enemy from where he stood. His sharp gaze picked up on a few things that didn't feel right. Duryodhana's eyes looked bloodshot, his fingers had dried blood on them and he was more fidgety than ever. Maybe the occasion had got to Duryodhana. Maybe.

Arjuna was widely believed to be the greatest archer the land had ever seen. There was one, however, who claimed to be greater. Warriors from both camps knew that the imminent battle would put that question to rest once and for all.

But where was *he*? *His* absence in that Kaurava army pricked Arjuna like a venom-tipped thorn. Arjuna smelt a trap, possibly another act of deceit from the Kaurava clan. *He* could well have been concealed behind an ingenious army formation. But Arjuna couldn't be sure.

Arjuna stole a quick look towards his elder brother, Yudhistira, who was in his own chariot a few metres away. Yudhistira seemed to share the same concern. Over the years, the five Pandava brothers had learnt to read each other's minds to the point where just a little nod of the head was enough to communicate their thoughts.

Yudhistira got off his chariot and walked across to the enemy. He headed straight to their commander-in-chief, to the man they all referred to as *Grandsire*. With folded hands, Yudhistira prostrated to the man they all loved, but a man who now stood in their path. Having received blessings from Grandsire Bhishma, Yudhistira walked back to his chariot, making eye-contact with Arjuna.

It was confirmed. *He* was truly nowhere to be seen.

Earlier that morning, as they prepared for the war, the Pandava spy network had informed them that Grandsire Bhishma had forced *him* to sit out of the war, refusing to fight alongside a mere charioteer's son. But Arjuna had not believed it then. There had already been far too much hearsay and rumours seemed to float around at will. Only the eyes could be trusted.

Dhristadyumna, the commander-in-chief of the Pandava camp caught Arjuna's attention. He was about to blow the conch at the same time as every other warrior on the battlefield. Krishna arose and pressed his conch to his lips, forcing the others, including Arjuna to follow suit.

As the conches blared and the trumpets roared and war-cries filled the skies, Arjuna whispered the question to himself.

Where in the world was Karna?
