

## **ACT III**

**New York**

'Name?' the officer at the immigration counter said.

'Madhav Jha,' I said, wondering why he didn't just read it on my passport.

'Mr Jha, what is the purpose of your visit to the United States?'

He flipped the pages of my passport, blank except for my new US visa.

*To find the love of my life*, I wanted to say.

'I'm interning with the Gates Foundation in New York.'

'Documentation, please.'

I took out a plastic folder from my rucksack. It had my internship offer letter, confirming my stipend of three thousand dollars a month I also had certification from Michael's office, the cash advance the foundation had given me and my visa documents.

The immigration officer examined my file.

'Where will you be staying in New York, sir?'

'With friends. On the Upper East Side, 83rd Street and Third Avenue.'

The officer fumbled with my passport for a few seconds. He picked up a stamp.

The 'bam' sounded like a gunshot—to indicate that my race to find Riya had begun.

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I took a yellow taxi from JFK airport towards Manhattan, the main island that forms the City of New York. It was my first trip outside India and the first thing I noticed was the colour of the sky. It was a crisp, crystal-clear blue; one never sees such a sky in India. I can understand India is dusty, but why is our sky less blue? Or is it the dust in the air that prevents us from seeing it?

The second thing that hit me was the silence. The taxi sped on a road filled with traffic. However, nobody honked, not even at signals. The silence almost made my ears hurt.

Initially, I only saw row houses and brick-coloured warehouses, nothing quite as impressive as I had imagined. However, thirty minutes from the airport, the taxi reached the Brooklyn Bridge, over the Hudson River. One had to cross this bridge to reach Manhattan. The bridge resembled the Howrah Bridge of Kolkata I had seen on TV, only bigger and cleaner. On the other side, a thousand skyscrapers loomed. Literally one tall building after another dotted the entire city. We crossed the bridge and entered Manhattan.

‘Welcome to The Big Apple,’ said the taxi driver in an American accent.

‘Are you from here?’ I said.

‘Now, yes. Originally from Amritsar,’ he said.

I looked at the taxi driver's name: Balwinder Singh. Okay, not quite as exotic as I had imagined.

In Manhattan, I saw people, busy people. Early morning joggers, people going to office in suits, children on their way to school. The city seemed like a maze, with criss-crossing streets and avenues. If one were to get lost here, it would take years to be found again.

‘It's all arranged in one grid,’ the driver said. ‘You going to Upper East, yeah?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said and handed him the address.

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‘Madhav Jha. You made it,’ Shailesh squealed in excitement as he opened the door.

I struggled to catch my breath. I had climbed three floors with a backpack and a heavy suitcase.

‘These are pre-war buildings’ Shailesh said. He dragged my suitcase into the apartment. ‘From before the Second World War. You get higher ceilings and more character. However, the lift breaks down every week.’

He took me to the guestroom of his three-bedroom apartment, which looked high-end and was done up in an ethnic Indian style with brass Ganeshas and Madhubani paintings of Krishna. Shailesh had

done an MBA from Harvard after Stephen's. He had joined Goldman Sachs, a top Wall Street investment bank. He shared the apartment with his girlfriend, Jyoti, whom he had met at Harvard. Jyoti worked at Morgan Stanley, another Wall Street investment bank. The size of the apartment told me the banks paid them well. Dark circles under Shailesh's eyes told me they also made him work hard.

'M&A, that's mergers and acquisitions,' Shailesh said, telling me about his work. We sat in his living room. I had reached early, at 6.30 in the morning. Shailesh was ready for work, wearing a grey suit and a dark blue silk tie. He ate breakfast cereal with milk and slipped on his leather loafers.

'Sorry I'm rushing,' Shailesh said. 'Jyoti and I catch the 7 a.m. subway to work. Catch up in the evening, okay?'

'No problem,' I said. 'I need to rest anyway. I'm so tired.'

'Try not to sleep. It will help you adjust to the jet lag,' Shailesh said.

The ten-hour difference in time zones meant my body wanted to sleep while New York City had just woken up.

'Jyoti!' Shailesh shouted.

'Coming,' a female voice in a thick American accent came from one of the bedrooms.

'Shailesh, if you can put me in touch with a real-estate broker...' I started to say.

He interrupted me. 'Are you crazy? You're here for a short while. It's an internship, right?'

'Three months. I can't stay with you that long.'

'Why not? You relax here. I have to go to London tomorrow but we are definitely catching up tonight.' Shailesh finished his breakfast and took the plates to the kitchen sink.

'You've changed so much, Shailesh. We sat in shorts doing adda all day in Stephen's. Now, suits, hi-fi banker life, New York City,' I said. He laughed.

'Times change, lives change. You have to move on, pal.'

I thought about Shailesh's statement. I nodded, even though in half-agreement.

Jyoti, a thin, five-feet-six-inches-tall girl, appeared. She wore a formal black skirt and shirt with a jacket.

'Hi, Madhav. Have heard so much about you,' Jyoti said and extended her hand. She sounded like Samantha, except she had brown skin and black eyes.

"Me too. Sorry to bother you until I find an apartment.'

'Stay as long as you want. Work keeps us so busy. At least someone can use the place,' Jyoti said and turned to Shailesh. 'You ready to go, honey?'

Shailesh nodded.

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I unpacked my clothes in the guestroom while making plans for the next couple of days; the internship did not start until the day after. I wondered if any live music bars would be open now.

I lay down for five minutes and woke up five hours later, disoriented. Jet lag had made me lose track of time and space. I needed a local SIM card. I checked the dollars in my wallet, picked up the house keys and left.

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Manhattan has a grid-like structure. Numbered streets run north to south. The wider avenues run from east to west. Shailesh's home on Third Avenue and 83rd Street was close to Central Park, which had its eastern side on Fifth Avenue.

The park, a landmark of the city, is three-and-a-half square kilometres in area and runs all the way from 60th Street in the south to 120th Street up north, and Fifth Avenue on the east to Ninth Avenue on the west.

The park helped me orient myself. Its southern tip had shops where I could buy a SIM card.

I walked west from Third to Fifth Avenue, and then down south twenty-three blocks from 83rd Street to 60th Street. In twenty minutes,

I reached the southeast corner of the park. I found a row of shops, including a store called 'T-Mobile'.

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The T-Mobile salesperson offered me a SIM card with a 3G data plan, 'If you take a two-year contract, I can also give you a free iPhone.'

'I'm not here that long,' I said.

I agreed to rent a touchscreen phone along with a voice and data plan.

'It'll take twenty minutes to activate,' the salesperson said. I left the shop and walked back north towards Central Park. I had not eaten anything for hours. I scanned the various cafes and delis, each displaying their lunch specials. Most dishes cost close to ten dollars each. A van parked outside Central Park sold bagels, a doughnut shaped bread stuffed with cream cheese or other fillings. It cost only three dollars, including a cold drink.

I got a bagel with cream cheese, tomatoes and onions. A giant-sized Coke came along with it.

I sat on an empty bench outside Central Park and watched tourists walk past. New York City looked beautiful and clean. The first day you spend out of India in a developed country takes a while to sink in. The swanky buildings, the smooth roads, the gleaming shops and the lack of noise (nobody blares horns for some reason) make you feel like you have entered a fairy tale where nothing can ever go wrong. I ate my lunch on the park bench.

A 3G sign on the corner of my phone screen indicated I had network. I typed in my first Google search: 'Live music venues in New York City'.

The Internet worked fine. The search results weren't fine. Literally thousands of places popped up. The first link directed me to the website of Time Out magazine. That site itself had a top-100 list of the best live music venues in the city. In Patna, you would be lucky to find one place that played live music. In Dumraon, the only way you could

hear live music at a bar is if you yourself sang. In New York City, however, there is an endless number of places. I sat on the Central Park bench and examined the tall buildings around me. I felt small and insignificant.

*It's a live music venue in one city, how difficult can it be?* is what I had told myself before coming here. Now it didn't seem easy at all.

I went to Google Maps. It showed my current location as 59th Street and Sixth Avenue. It also showed me to be a three-kilometre walk away from Shailesh's house. A cold breeze penetrated my Bihar-strength sweater. I crossed my arms and held them close to my chest.

*You are so stupid, Madhav,* I said to myself as I walked north on Fifth Avenue, along the edge of the park. On a whim, I had packed my bags and come to this cold city. A gust of wind left my face numb.

'I can't do this,' I said.

I took deep breaths. I reminded myself of old basketball matches, which I had won with sheer willpower.

*One street, one avenue, one bar at a time, Madhav.*

You bagged a Gates Foundation grant. Incredible,' Jyoti said. We ate chapatis and chana masala for dinner at Shailesh's house on my first night in New York.

'My school did. They liked the good work the team had done,' I said.

'It's him,' Shailesh said. 'He cracked it. Bill Gates himself saw the school and proposed the grant.'

Jyoti said, 'Can this internship lead to a full-time job in New York?'

'I don't want a job,' I said.

'You're doing it for the experience?' Shailesh said.

'It's for... Well, there is another reason.' I said and turned silent. I looked at Jyoti.

Shailesh understood my hesitation.

'You want to tell me later?' he said.

'Buddy secrets, is it?' Jyoti smiled. I smiled back. Jyoti stood up to go to the kitchen.

'Whatever you tell me, I will end up telling her,' Shailesh said and looked at her. She blew him a kiss.

'All right then. Sit, Jyoti,' I said.

Jyoti sat down again, very attentive.

'I am here to look for someone,' I said.

'Look for?' Jyoti said. 'You don't have his contact?'

'Her. No, I don't. I'm not even sure she's here.'

'Ah, her. It's about a girl. Isn't it always?' Jyoti said.

'Who?' Shailesh said.

'Riya,' I said.

'Riya? Who? Riya Somani?' Shailesh said.

'Well, yes,' I said.

Shailesh let out a whistle.

'What the fuck,' Shailesh said. 'Really? You're in New York



looking for Riya Somani?’

He started to laugh.

‘Who is Riya Somani? Clearly she has created some excitement here,’ Jyoti said.

‘His...well, how do I say it? Well, kind of your ex-girlfriend, right?’

‘Half-girlfriend, Ex-half-girlfriend,’ I said.

‘That was ages ago,’ Shailesh said, sounding confused. ‘Didn’t she get married to her cousin in London or something? She dropped out, right?’

‘It wasn’t her cousin. It was Rohan, a family friend and rakhi brother. Not a cousin,’

I hate it when college rumours get blown out of proportion.

‘Sorry, I don’t remember the details. She messed with you, man, and flew away to London with her husband,’ Shailesh said.

I smiled.

‘There’s more to that story. A lot more. Want to hear it?’ I said.

Jyoti and Shailesh nodded. They listened with rapt attention.

I told them everything. I ended my story at 10 in the night.

Jyoti turned to Shailesh.

‘I had no idea Indian men could be so romantic,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ Shailesh said, looking wounded.

‘You don’t walk me to my office from the subway stop,’ Jyoti said. ‘And here are people coming halfway across the world to find lost love.’

‘C’mon Jyoti. Everything is not an excuse to nag,’ Shailesh said and turned to me. ‘But, boss, you are mind-blowing. Still chasing that chick after, what, seven years?’

‘That’s so romantic,’ Jyoti said dreamily.

‘It’s also stupid,’ Shailesh said.

‘Shailesh!’ Jyoti said.

‘I’m just being protective of my friend.’

‘He’s right,’ I said, interrupting Shailesh. ‘I am being stupid. But I can’t help it, She means everything to me.’

‘Everything? You thought she was dead. You survived, right?’  
Shailesh said.

‘Survived, yes, Lived, no.’

Jyoti sighed. Shailesh gave up. He got us a bottle of red wine and three glasses. ‘You guys have to wake up early,’ I said as I took a sip. ‘Feel free to go to bed.’

‘No worries,’ Shailesh said. ‘What is your plan?’

‘I will step out now.’

‘Now?’ Jyoti said, gulping down her wine.

‘I will start with live music venues on the Upper East Side.’

‘This late?’ Jyoti said.

‘Nothing starts before ten anyway,’ I said.

I finished my glass and stood up.

‘It’s New York City. Every block has bars with live music.’ Shailesh said.

‘I’ll have to visit every block, I guess,’ I said.

‘You are mad.’ Shailesh said.

‘Depends on how you look at it,’ I said.

‘Meaning?’

‘You wake up at 6 and put on a suit. You reach office at 7.30 in the morning and work thirteen hours a day. Some may find that pretty mad.’

‘I get rewarded for it, bro. In dollars.’

‘Riya is my ultimate reward,’ I said. Shailesh had no answer.

‘You need a warmer jacket, wait/’ Jyoti said. She rummaged in a cupboard and came back with a leather jacket with a down filling.

‘Thanks,’ I said. I walked out of the apartment and shut the door behind me. Inside, I could hear Shailesh say, ‘You think he needs a psychiatrist?’

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Google Maps doesn’t judge lunatic lovers. It simply gave me results when I looked for live music bars near me. The first suggestion was Brandy’s Piano Bar on 84th Street, between Second and Third

Avenue, a mere five-minute walk away.

I reached Brandy's, a tiny bar one would miss if one wasn't looking for it. A two-drink minimum policy applied to all customers. I didn't want to have drinks. I just wanted to meet the management and find out the list of singers.

'Sir, you need to order two drinks,' the waitress told me, chewing gum. I realized I would need a better way to do this. For now, I found the cheapest drink on the menu.

'Two Budweiser beers, please.'

A makeshift stage had a piano on it. I had entered during a break. Ten minutes later, a singer called Matt came and took his seat.

'Hi guys, lovely to see you all again, let's start with Aerosmith,' Matt said.

The crowd broke into cheers. I guessed Aerosmith was a popular band. Matt sang in a slow, clear voice. My English practice meant I could catch a few words; *'I could stay awake just to hear you breathing. Watch you smile while you are sleeping.'*

Customers swung their heads from side to side. Matt sang and played the piano at the same time. *'Don't wanna close my eyes, I don't wanna fall asleep. 'Cause I'd miss you, baby. And I don't wanna miss a thing'*

I didn't want to fall asleep either. I wanted to stay up all night and look for Riya in as many bars as I could. I opened my Google Maps app again. The streets of Manhattan seemed manageable on the phone screen. In reality, this was a megacity of millions.

*She may not even be in New York*, a soft voice in my head told me. It was the only sensible voice I had left. As always, I ignored it. I focused on the music. I felt the pain of the singer who couldn't bear to sleep as it would mean missing moments with his lover.

I went up to the cashier and asked for the manager. When he arrived, I posed my standard list of questions.

'I've come from India looking for a lost friend. All I know is she is probably a singer at a bar in New York. Can you tell me who your

singers are?’

‘Too many, my friend. The schedule is on the noticeboard. You know her name?’ the manager said.

‘Her real name is Riya.’

‘No such name, I’m pretty sure.’

‘She may have changed it for the stage,’ I said.

‘That’s a tough search then, my friend.’

‘She’s tall, slim and pretty. Long hair, well, at least when I saw her last.’

‘This is a city of tall, slim and pretty people.’

‘Indian, She’s an Indian singer in a New York bar.’

‘She sings Bollywood? I would check the Indian restaurants.’

‘Unlikely. She liked Western music. Do you remember seeing any Indian singer at your bar?’

The manager thought for a few seconds. He shook his head.

‘Sorry, mate. The schedule is there. See if something rings a bell.’

I walked to the noticeboard. I saw the timetable for various gigs all month, The singers’ descriptions did not suggest anyone like Riya.

The waitress gave me the bill for two beers. She added a 20 per cent tip to it.

‘20 per cent?’

‘It’s New York,’ she said, glaring. I later learnt that tipping wasn’t optional in New York.

I left Brandy’s and visited a couple of other bars in the neighbourhood. There was Marty O’Brien’s on 87th street in Second Avenue. It had more rock bands than singers. Uptown Restaurant and Lounge on 88th Street had its schedule placed outside. I could only find two female singers. Both were American, the doorman told me. The posh Carlyle Hotel, all the way down on 76th Street, had a bar called Bemelman’s. Drinks cost fifteen dollars each, excluding the tip. I sat on a small couch in the corner of the bar and stayed away from the waiter to avoid placing an order.

The singer, a beautiful, six-foot-tall blonde American woman, sang

a love song: *'I have loved you for a thousand years, I will love you for a thousand more.'*

A waiter came up to me to take my order. I told him I had to leave for some urgent work. I stood up.

'By the way, do you have other female singers here?' I said.

'A couple of them. They alternate.'

'Anybody who looks Indian?'

'I couldn't tell, sir,' the waiter said. Americans don't like to take a shot at answering questions they don't know—unlike Indians, who pretty much know everything about everything.

'Tall, really pretty girl who looks Indian?'

'No, sir. Only two black singers, and two Caucasian ones.'

Even at midnight, on a weekday, the place was packed. Everyone around me seemed incredibly happy. They clinked glasses and laughed at jokes. They probably didn't know of Bihar's existence. Neither would they know how it felt to love someone for a thousand years, as the singer crooned.

I did.

The Gates Foundation's head office in the United States is in Seattle. It is where Microsoft is based and where Bill Gates lives. Apart from that, they have an East Coast office in Washington. In New York, they often work with their partners on various projects. Since I had insisted on New York, Michael had given me a place on a Foundation project with the United Nations. The UN world headquarters is located in mid-town New York. On my first day to work, I walked to the 86th Street station on Lexington Avenue. I took train number four and got down at Grand Central Station on 42nd Street, walking half a mile to the massive United Nations Plaza complex. After a three-layered security process, I reached the office of the UNFPA, or the United Nations Population Fund.

'Mr Jha, welcome. Come in.' A forty-year-old black man twice my width met me in the reception area.

I entered an office filled with books and reports.

'Olara Lokeris from Uganda. Worked with the Population Fund for ten years. I will be your mentor.'

The Gates Foundation had granted 57 million US dollars to the UNFPA to educate youth on preventing HIV/AIDS in African countries. I had to make a report on the project's progress. Of course, I had no experience either in Africa, or in making a report.

'I run a school in Bihar, India. I'm sorry, but this Africa and HIV research is all new to me.'

Olara smiled. His white teeth glistened in his large face.

'Don't worry. Making reports is much easier than running an actual school,' he said.

Olara spent the rest of the afternoon explaining the various databases maintained in the project to me.

'Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Botswana are the four main countries of focus,' he said.

He briefed me on other logistical and administrative issues related

to my internship. He also told me that work hours would be from 9 to 5, with a lunch break in between.

‘First time in New York?’ Olara said.

‘Yes.’

‘Good, I will take you out for a drink after work.’ : ‘Sure,’ I said.

‘Any preferences?’

‘Any place with live music,’ I said.

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### **One month later**

‘Dude, no. Please. I can’t take this,’ Shailesh said. He pushed the envelope back towards me.

I had placed a thousand dollars inside.

‘It’s been a month, Shailesh. I feel obligated,’ I said.

‘Would I pay you rent if I came to Dumraon?’ he said.

‘No, but you are paying rent here. So let me contribute.’

‘Don’t be stupid. You are hardly here. You come home at 3 every night. You leave at 8. We barely feel your presence.’

Shailesh was right. We had not met the entire week, even though we lived in the same house.

‘How’s work?’ he said. ‘What exactly is your project?’

‘Tracking the progress of AIDS awareness initiatives in Botswana.’

‘Sounds noble.’

‘I don’t know about noble. All I know is I only have two months left and there’s still no sign of Riya.’

Shailesh tilted his box of cereal. The box label said ‘Cinnamon Toast Crunch’. Little sugar-coated squares fell into his milk.

‘You are chasing an illusion,’ he said.

‘Maybe.’

‘How many bars have you visited in the last month?’

I flipped through my notebook where I kept track of all my visits.

‘Hundred-plus. Close to two hundred,’ I said.

Apart from actual visits, I had also called up five hundred other music venues. Nobody had heard of a singer called Riya.

Shailesh gasped. He covered his mouth with his hand to prevent food from spilling out. He waited a few seconds to chew the contents in his mouth before he spoke again.

‘Madhav, I love you as a friend so I am saying it. You have to stop this. She is gone. Wish her happiness. Move on.’

‘I will. But only after I feel that I’ve tried my best. Two more months.’

‘I would say end it now. And why go back in two months? Is there a chance of a full-time assignment with the UN?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never really showed an interest.’

‘Stop living in the past. Make a new life. Look for work here and meet other people.’

I smiled and nodded, He made sense. I was not interested in sense. He finished his breakfast, Slipping on his shoes, he said, ‘Come out with us sometime, Jyoti has many lovely single friends.’

‘Sure. Let me know if you’re going to a live music venue.’ Shailesh looked at me and laughed, ‘Mad you are,’ he said. ‘Anyway, I better leave or I’ll miss my train,’

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I had a one-hour lunch break at the UN. Most days I ate a sandwich from the Subway or Starbucks outside. Since Shailesh had refused to take rent, I had enough money to even have a cappuccino later. I had found a fixed corner seat at Starbucks from which to make my calls.

‘Hi, is this the West Village Talenthouse?’ I said,

‘Yes, it is,’ an older lady with a heavy American accent said, ‘Can I speak to the manager?’

‘May I ask what this is about?’

‘I’m looking for a singer.’

‘We have lots of them. Did you check our website?’

‘Yes, I did. However, I am looking for someone specific not listed there.’

‘Didn’t get you, honey,’



‘Well, it's a girl, Indian-origin. She is in her early twenties. Her real name is Riya. I don't think she uses that on stage.’

‘I can't help you with such limited information. Did you see her perform somewhere?’

‘Well, no. Actually, she is an old friend. I am trying to locate her,’

‘Sorry, getting another call, bye.’

She hung up. I had another sip from my Venti-sized cup, which held over half-a-litre of coffee. Americans are into size, whether it is their cars, bodies or food. I had ten minutes of lunch break left. I called a few more bars and one more talent agency. Finally, I made a route plan to visit six bars in the evening around the Tribeca area.

'No Indian singer here. I'm sorry,' she said.

I had come to Tribeca Nation, a small bar with thirty seats and a tiny stage for solo vocalists. The singer had just finished her performance.

I had gone up to her and told her I loved her voice. I asked her if she would have a few minutes to sit with me. She looked at me suspiciously.

'I just have some questions. Nothing else,' I had told her.

She ordered a Jack Daniel's whisky and Diet Coke, and urged me to try the same.

Erica was twenty-two years old. She was from Rhode Island, a state north of New York. She wanted to act in a Broadway play, and tried her luck at auditions during the day. At night, she earned a living through singing gigs.

'I finished high school and came here.'

I looked at her.

'No college, sorry.' She grinned. Over the past few weeks, I had learnt a thing or two about Americans. If they wanted something, they went for it. They didn't think about the risks so much. Which Indian parent would allow a girl to sing in bars at night after class XII, I wondered?

'I really need to find this girl,' I said, now two whiskies down and more talkative.

'Love. Makes us do crazy things,' she said.

'Well, I am going a little crazy.'

'Love.' She laughed. 'At least it keeps us singers in business.'

I gave her Riya's description.

'You spoke to agents?'

'As many as I could. No luck yet.'

'If she has a stage name, it can get quite difficult.'

'Well, she is Indian. I am hoping someone will remember her. I

have two months left.'

'I'll let you know in case I spot someone.'

'That would be helpful.'

'I don't have your number.'

We shared contacts. She recommended other bars.

'Here,' she passed me a tissue she had scribbled names on. 'These are places that give new singers a chance.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'She's a lucky girl,' Erica said.

'It's me who needs some luck now,' I said.

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### **One and a half months later**

'See you at Pylos then. At 7th Street and First Avenue. Eight o'clock.' Shailesh ended the call.

Pylos is a high-end Greek restaurant located in the East Village. Earthen terracotta pots with spotlights dangled from the ceiling. In Bihar, nobody would think that the humble matki could play chandelier.

Shailesh and Jyoti had invited me out to dinner. Jyoti had brought her friend Priya along, without warning me.

'Priya is a journalist with Al Jazeera in New York. We went to high school together,' Jyoti said. Priya looked like she was in her early twenties. Fashionable glasses, slim figure, attractive. She wore a navy-blue top with a white pencil skirt and a long silver chain that dangled down till her navel, which was visible when she stretched.

'This is Madhav. He's here on a United Nations project,' Shailesh said. Cue for Priya and me to shake hands and smile.

I told her about my internship and what I did back home in India.

'You run a rural Indian school? That is so cool,' she said.

'Thanks,' I said.

We ordered a bottle of Greek wine. We also asked for motissaka, which is sauteed eggplant and tomato layered with caramelised onions, herbs and a cheese sauce. A mountain-shaped dish, piled with

vegetables, arrived on our table.

I ate a spoonful.

‘This is like chokha,’ I said.

‘Chokha?’ Priya said.

‘It’s a popular dish in Bihar. Which part of India are you from?’

‘I’m from Minnesota,’ she said. I realized that NRIs born in the US did not like being referred to as Indians.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Anyway. This is similar to a local dish we have.’

‘My parents are from Andhra Pradesh,’ she said.

Shailesh refilled my glass of wine.

Jyoti ordered more food. We had a trio of Greek dips, consisting of tzatziki, a thick yogurt dip; taramosalata, a dip made of fish eggs; and melitzanosalata, made with char-grilled eggplants and extra-virgin Greek olive oil. It came with pita bread.

‘I’m sorry, but this bread is also like our chapati,’ I said.

‘Yes, indeed. These are all flatbreads. From Greece and Turkey to the Middle East and all the way down to South Asia, flatbreads are popular,’ Priya said.

‘Is she Wikipedia?’ Shailesh asked Jyoti and we all laughed.

‘She is. Just be happy she’s not discussing the Greek economic crisis because you came to a Greek place,’ Jyoti said.

‘Oh no, please. I read enough economic reports in the bank,’ Shailesh said.

‘Hey, I’m a nerd and a proud one. Cheers.’ Priya raised her glass. All of us lifted ours.

‘Don’t worry, UN boy, I won’t bore you with my little nuggets of wisdom anymore,’ Priya said. She clinked her glass against mine.

The girls decided to make a trip to the ladies’ room together. Why do they go together for a solo activity?

‘Like her?’ Shailesh said, after the girls had left.

‘Huh?’

‘Priya. She’s giving you the eye, dude. Isn’t she hot?’

‘What?’ I said.

‘You play your cards right and she can be yours.’

I shook my head.

‘I’m not kidding,’ Shailesh said.

‘Not interested.’

‘I’m not asking you to marry her. Take her out, have fun. Loosen up.’

‘Very funny, I hardly have any time left in New York, Only two more weeks,’

‘All the more reason, Don’t go back without some romance. Or a score,’ He winked at me.

‘I have a final report to finish, I haven’t even started to pack. Plus, so many bars to go to,’

‘You won’t give up on this Riya nonsense?’

I kept quiet and finished my third glass of wine,

‘You’ve visited or called over a thousand places,’ Shailesh said, ‘In two weeks it all ends anyway. I am tired, too. Just giving it my best shot,’

‘Idiot you are,’ Shailesh said,

We heard giggles as the girls returned.

‘My friend here thinks you’re a little serious. But hot in a brooding sort of way,’ Jyoti announced, Priya smacked Jyoti’s arm, ‘Shut up. You can’t repeat a private conversation,’ said Priya, blushing as she sat down again, Shailesh kicked my leg. Act, buddy, he seemed to say.

The waiter brought us another bottle of wine. I poured my fourth glass, ‘For dessert I would recommend a drained Greek yogurt served with fresh cherries, thyme-scented Greek honey and walnuts,’ the waiter said. The girls swooned over the description and ordered two servings.

‘Where are we going next?’ Priya said.

Well, we are the boring banker couple. We have early morning calls,’ Shailesh said. ‘So we will head home. Why don’t Madhav and you check out other places in the neighbourhood?’

‘Sure, I don’t mind. I could show Madhav the East Village area

around Pylos. I used to live here earlier,’

‘Actually, I have other places to go to,’ I said. I did have five places on my list tonight.

‘Madhav, the lady wants to go out,’ Shailesh said. He kicked me again under the table.

‘Stop kicking me,’ I said. The wine had made me more confident. Jyoti looked startled by the sudden rise in my voice.

‘I need to go. Thanks for dinner. What is my share?’ I stood up. My head felt heavy. I had drunk too much.

‘Sit down, Madhav. We are trying to help you,’ Shailesh said.

‘What am I? A fucking patient who needs help?’

My wine glass slipped from my hand and fell on the floor. There was shattered glass all over the floor.

‘You do need help, Madhav. You’re losing the plot,’ Shailesh said.

Customers at other tables were looking at us. A waiter came to remove the broken glass.

‘We should go. Shailesh, did you pay the bill?’ Jyoti said.

‘Did I say something wrong?’ Priya said.

‘No,’ Jyoti said to Priya.

‘So what just happened?’ Priya said.

‘The boys go back a long way. They have their way of talking. Don’t worry about it.’

Shailesh took hold of my upper arm. He dragged me out of the restaurant. The cold December breeze hit us all.

‘You are drunk,’ Shailesh said in a slow, deliberately calm voice. ‘Let’s take a cab home. We will drop Priya on the way.’

‘I am not drunk,’ I said, even though I found it hard to keep my balance on the icy street.

‘You drank wine like water,’ Shailesh said.

A yellow cab stopped next to us. The girls got in. Shailesh shoved me into the front seat. He sat behind with the girls.

‘83rd and Third please, with a stop at 37th first,’ Jyoti said.

I opened the front door of the car.

'I have to visit five bars,' I said and stepped out.

Priya looked at Jyoti, confused.

'You are drunk. Come back in so we can leave. It's cold outside,' Shailesh said, in a firm but annoyed voice.

'I am not drunk,' I screamed, stumbling on the road and falling on all fours. I twisted my right ankle and it hurt like hell.

'Can you cut the drama and come back in?' Shailesh said.

The girls saw me wince and were about to step out when Shailesh stopped them.

'Are you coming or not? I'm running out of patience, bro,' he said.

'I have to visit five bars,' I said again, still wincing from the pain of the fall.

'Chutiya,' Shailesh said. He slammed the door shut and the cab zoomed off. A few cold drops fell on my face. I looked up at the sky. Little white snowflakes were falling everywhere. A homeless man offered a hand to help me stand up. Only the most pathetic can help the most pathetic.

'I have to visit five bars,' I told the homeless man.

'I'm so ashamed, I can't even look at you guys,' I said, eyes down.

I sat at the dining table in Shailesh's house. I had brought muffins, bagels, cream cheese, fresh orange juice, takeaway coffee and fruit from Dean and Deluca, a neighbourhood deli.

Shailesh did not respond,

'When did you come back? And when did you get so much food?' Jyoti said.

'I came back at 6. I tried to sleep but the guilt wouldn't let me. So I went out and got breakfast.'

Jyoti said, 'You need not have bothered. We were so worried about you last night.'

'No, we weren't,' Shailesh cut Jyoti off.

I said to her, 'Sorry, Jyoti. I behaved like an ass in front of your friend. I embarrassed you guys. Luckily, I will be gone soon.'

Shailesh didn't say anything. He just stared at me without a word. 'Shailesh, I'm sorry. I had too much wine. I didn't know Greek wine was so potent,'

'That's not the point, Madhav. We all get high and have fun. You disrespected us. Priya felt horrible. You ruined a special evening,'

'I'm sorry. You are right.'

'Did you see yourself? Staggering on the road screaming "five more bars". What has happened to you?'

'It's sinking in finally. I might never meet Riya again. It is the realization that my effort was a waste. It got to me yesterday.'

'You are still visiting places. Five bars, five bars, you kept saying. What the fuck, Madhav?'

'I never went. I couldn't. I passed out.'

'How did you get home?' Jyoti said.

'I woke up shivering near a bus stop. Took a cab and came home.'

Jyoti and Shailesh looked at each other.

'You might be right, Shailesh. I may need a psychiatrist,' I said.



Shailesh gave me a sarcastic smile.

Jyoti took the cream cheese and applied it on three bagels. I took a sip of black coffee.

‘Anyway, guys, I’m sorry I lost control. I hurt you guys, after all you have done for me. Enough is enough. No more visiting live music venues.’

‘Really? Promise?’ Shailesh took a bite of his bagel.

‘Yes. I want to finish my final report. I want to see a bit more of New York, even though it’s snowing and cold. More than anything, I want to spend my remaining free time with you both, because who knows when we will meet again.’

Jyoti smiled. She looked at Shailesh, gesturing for him to forgive me.

‘And if Priya is brave enough to meet me once more, I will apologize to her, too.’

Shailesh stood up. He came around to give me a bear hug.

‘Is it okay? Say something,’ I said to him.

‘Idiot you are, what else to say?’ Shailesh smiled.

Bye, Riya Somoni, I said in my head.

\*

‘What size? Speak louder, I can’t hear you,’ I said to my mother over the phone.

I had come to a store called Century 21 to buy gifts for people back home.

‘Take large size, and get me a cardigan with buttons,’ she said.

I had brought candies for the entire school. It was not the smartest idea. I now needed a new suitcase just to carry the treats.

‘Cardigan is done. Do you need anything else?’

‘I need some bras. I heard you get good ones there.’

‘Bye, Ma.’

\*

One week before the internship ended, I handed over my final report to Olara.

‘Thank you, Madhav. I look forward to reading your work,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Olara. You’ve been a great guide these past few month...’

‘Well, you are a bright man. Did you finally apply for a permanent position?’

‘I leave for India next Sunday.’

Olara smiled and patted my back.

I returned to my desk. My phone had a missed call from a contact I had saved as ‘Erica, Tribeca Nation singer’.

I called her back.

‘Hi,’ I said as she picked up the call.

‘Hi. Mad-dav, right?’ she said.

‘Yes, the Indian guy you met at Tribeca Nation.’

‘How are you? You were looking for someone, right?’

Warmth tingled through me. I told myself to calm down. I had promised Shailesh I’d quit.

‘Yes. I was.’

‘Any luck?’

‘Nope,’ I said.

‘Okay, so I don’t have much. This will confuse you even more. But there could be a new tall Indian girl who sings.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I overheard.’

‘Who from?’

‘Customers at the bar. They spoke about this good-looking singer and were trying to guess her nationality. Indian features, but quite fair-complexioned, that’s what they said. So it reminded me of you.’

‘And? What else did they say?’

‘They said she sang quite well. Jazz, a bit of rock...’

‘What? No, I mean where? Where did they hear her? Did you ask them?’

‘Well, yes. They said at the Union Square Farmer’s Market on 14th Street.’

‘Is it a bar?’

‘No, a farmer’s market is like a street fair. They have organic food stalls, and a couple of random gigs sometimes.’

‘So what do I do?’

‘I don’t know. Sorry, they didn’t know more.’

‘Will the fair organizers know?’

‘I doubt it. Its too huge a place. You call check. Take train number four to Union Square.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Sorry, Mad-dav. I said I would confuse you. But that day you said you don’t even know if she is here. Well, she might be.’

‘Thanks, Erica.’

Of course, my visit to Union Square proved useless. I didn't have a date or the exact location of the stall.

The farmer's market is put up in the Union Square quadrangle, a football-field sized area filled with over a hundred natural and environment-friendly product stalls. A few stalls featured performances ranging from juggling to music gigs. I passed organic honey and fruit-based soap counters to reach the fair office.

'Agents book the stalls. Then they call their own musicians on hire. It's quite impossible for us to trace them,' a lady at the fair office told me.

I took the subway back home. I felt stupid. I had wasted an evening I could have spent with my friends. I reached the 86th Street stop. I walked out to find the streets filled with snow. It was cold and dark. Still, under the city lights, New York, with its historic skyscrapers and modern neon lights, looked pretty. As I walked home, I passed restaurants with cosy interiors. Beautiful people chatted and laughed as they ate their dinner. I wondered if I would ever, even for one day in my life, be carefree like them.

\*

On my last Saturday in New York, I decided to visit the tourist attractions. I spent my morning visiting the Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. In the afternoon, I decided to splurge. I went to watch an NBA game.

'One ticket for the Knicks game, please,' I said at the ticket counter. Madison Square Garden, also known as the MSG or simply the Garden, is a multi-purpose indoor arena in midtown Manhattan in New York City. Located between Seventh and Eighth Avenues from 31st to 33rd Streets, it is situated atop Pennsylvania Station. I had come to the Garden to watch a play-off game between the New York Knicks and LA Lakers.

The Garden cost nearly a billion dollars to construct, making it one

of the most expensive stadiums in the world. I went inside, and was astonished by what I saw. It was the best basketball court and spectator stadium I had ever seen in my life.

The teams had towering players, many of them over six-and-a-half feet tall. The Lakers wore yellow kits with a purple strip down the side. The Knicks had on blue jerseys with an orange border.

I took my seat. It took me a minute to scan the huge arena and figure out all the complicated scoreboards. The crowd of nearly twenty thousand roared at every point scored.

I was in New York. However, I supported the LA Lakers. They had Kobe Bryant, one of the world's best basketball players and my favourite. He scored the most, over forty points in the game. I wondered if an Indian player would ever join the NBA.

The game ended with the Lakers scoring an easy win. The crowd, exhilarated from the game and the atmosphere, began to trickle out of the stadium. I followed them to the exit.

\*

As I came out of the MSG, I saw a couple of elderly people in jackets with the New York City Tourism logo, waiting near the exit. An elderly Hispanic woman walked slowly towards me.

‘Tourist?’ she said.

‘Yes, well, sort of,’ I said.

‘How your trip goes? Me Daisy, from the Senior Citizens for NYC tourism. Sorry my English not good. I am Mexico originally.’

‘My trip is going quite well, thank you,’ I said. ‘And your English is just fine.’

I could not believe I had commented on someone else’s English. She held a bunch of brochures in her hand.

‘May I ask the favour? Will you practise English me five minutes?’ Daisy said.

I had to go home and pack. This was an unusual request anyway.

‘I join adult school to learn English. To practise I volunteer here tourism department,’ Daisy persisted.

‘I actually have to go home.’

The older man with her took me aside.

‘Hi, I am Doug, a supervisor for the senior citizens for NYC volunteer programme.’

I shook hands with him.

‘Please spare five minutes for her. She lives alone. She needs to practise her English,’ Doug said.

‘Sir, my English is not so good. I am from India.’

‘Indians speak good English.’

‘Not all. I am also learning it.’

‘You are speaking good English now.’

‘Well, thank you, sir.’

‘Someone must have taught you.’

I sighed.

‘Five minutes,’ Doug said.

I nodded.

Doug left me with Daisy.

‘Hello, Madam Daisy. What would you like to talk about?’

‘Would you like brochure? To see attractions of weekend?’

‘Actually, I don’t think so. I leave soon...’ I said but she interrupted me.

‘They free. Have look. We have discounted Broadway shows, a food festival, a jazz and music fest...’

‘I will correct you. Please say, “they are free, have a look”,’ I said.

‘Sorry, sorry. That I say.’

‘I leave Monday. So I am afraid I won’t be able to do much,’ I said.

She looked disappointed. I figured she had to do her tourism job, too. She possibly had a quota of people she needed to distribute brochures to every day.

‘Fine, I’ll take them. Thank you.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ she said and cheered up again. ‘You fill small survey for me. Two minutes.’

I put the brochures in my jacket pocket. She gave me a form

asking basic details about my visit and myself, ‘Can I leave now, madam?’ I said, as politely as possible.

‘Enjoy rest of stay,’ she said and waved me goodbye.

‘Yes, yes. Thank you.’

I left the MSG compound and came to the street. Peak hours meant cabs would be stuck in traffic forever. I checked the time. It was 7 p.m. I decided to walk the four-kilometre distance from Madison Square Garden to Shailesh’s house.

'Surprise!'

A crowd of people screamed as I entered Shailesh's house. Jyoti had arranged an unexpected farewell party for me.

'Wow,' I said as I entered the apartment. I found twenty guests, Shailesh and Jyoti's friends, waiting for me.

'Hey, Priya, good to see you,' I said, wondering if she would slap me.

'Hi,' she said.

'I'm really sorry about that night.'

'Just go easy on the wine,' she said and laughed. I smiled back at her. She was really attractive. Many men at the party had their eyes on her.

A black man came up to me.

'Olara,' I said and hugged him.

'Your friends are damn nice. They dug out my number and invited me.'

'I'm so glad you came.'

Jyoti dragged me away from Olara to give a short speech.

'I want to thank Shailesh and Jyoti, who hosted me, and treated me like family,' I said.

'Cut it out, let's party,' Shailesh interrupted me. He offered everyone tequila shots and turned up the volume of the music player. Conversations required people to shout. Male bankers huddled together to discuss expected bonuses. The girls made another group. They discussed the best value offers in town, whether on Netflix or Sunday brunch deals in Manhattan. I chatted with a few people.

'Gates Foundation. They are like huge, man,' one banker said to me.

'I just run a small school they fund,' I said.

'I need a Gates Foundation grant. Do they fund bankers who need an apartment in Manhattan?' said another. Everyone laughed.



I spoke to many of those present, but felt little connection with any of them. I stepped away from the crowd and sat on the sofa. I took out my phone to look at the pictures I had taken during the day. I had taken some inside MSG.

‘You watched a Knicks game?’ I heard Priya’s voice from behind me.

I turned to look at her.

‘Yes, I went today.’

‘Nice pictures. Can I see?’

She sat down next to me. I flipped through the photos.

My phone vibrated. A message from ‘Erica, Tribeca Nation singer’.

*‘Checking out the Jazz and Music Fest?’* the message flashed as a notification and disappeared. The phone screen went back to displaying pictures again, ‘Next?’ Priya said as I didn’t touch my phone for a minute, ‘Priya, just a second. I need to send a reply,’

‘Oh, sure, I will get a drink, Not for you, though,’ she smiled, wagging a finger at me, I smiled back, I composed a message for Erica: *I leave Monday. Almost packed. At my farewell party now. Thanks anyway. :)* She replied: *Fly safe. Ciao. :)* I looked up. I saw Priya engrossed in conversation with someone at the bar.

I shut my phone and placed it in my jacket pocket. I then realized that I was still carrying the brochures Daisy, the old lady, had given me outside Madison Square Garden. I read them one by one.

‘CATS—the longest running Broadway musical,’ said the first.

‘Blue Man Comedy Show—combining music, technology and comedy,’ said another.

One of the brochures was a sixteen-page thick, A5-sized booklet. It said ‘New York Music and Jazz Festival Weekend’.

The room lights had been dimmed, making it difficult for me to read the text. I shifted my seat closer to a candle on the coffee table. ‘123 performers. 25 venues. 3 days. 1 city,’ it said on the booklet cover.

The booklet opened with a two-page spread of the schedule of performances. It was arranged in three tables, one each for Friday,

Saturday and Sunday. Each table had rows for the various time slots. The columns had the names of the singer, the venue and the kind of music and ticket prices. The next two pages had details of each venue. The remaining pages had a brief description of each singer, over a hundred of them. I read the first one: *Abigail—Grew up in Boston, degree in jazz music. Started out as a gospel singer. After singing in Boston for two years, she moved to New York. Boston Globe called her voice 'smooth velvet' that can 'calm your soul'.*

I went through the names, mostly to pass time. I didn't really belong in my own party.

I skimmed through all the descriptions in the alphabetical list. I ignored all the male singers. Twenty minutes later, I reached the letter R.

*Ray - A 'sparkling new voice on the NY scene' according to the Village Voice, Ray would rather talk about 'where she is going' than 'where she comes from. This tall exotic beauty 'sings as good as she looks ' according to the Daily News.*

I stopped at Ray's description. I read it thrice. I flipped back to the schedule to see Ray's line-up. I looked under Saturday, which was today. My index finger ran down the schedule page.

'Blues, Soul and Contemporary, 10.00 p.m.-12.00 a.m. Stephanie, Roger and Ray, Cafe Wha?, \$8 entry, two drinks minimum,'

I turned the page to look up the details of Cafe Wha? and strained hard to read the tiny print.

*Cafe Wha? An old classic New York bar where many legends have performed in their struggling days. Mexican and American food options. 115 MacDougal Street, West Village. Subway 4, 5, 6. Bleecker Street F, West 4th Street.*

'What are you doing, bro?' Shailesh squeezed my shoulder hard.

'Huh?' I said, startled.

'It's your party. What the hell are you reading?'

I put the brochure aside and smiled.

'Nothing. Just some touristy stuff,' I said.

‘You’re not drinking?’ he said. He tapped his thigh in time with the music.

‘No. You know me and alcohol.’

‘I can handle you at home. Wait, let me get a drink for you.’

Shailesh went to the bar. I checked the time on my phone. It said 11.05 p.m.

I googled Cafe Wha?’s number and called them.

They took thirty seconds to pick up. It seemed like an hour.

‘Hello. Cafe Wha?’ I heard a cheerful male voice, barely audible due to the music in the background.

‘Hi, I am interested in the Music and Jazz Fest performance tonight.’

‘Yes, it’s on now, sir. It’s an eight-dollar cover charge. Two drinks minimum,’ the person on the other side recited his rehearsed stuff.

‘I wanted to know if there is a singer called Ray performing tonight?’

‘Well, let me see. Yes, we have three singers. Hers is the last act. Should be on any time now. Sir, I need to hang up. It’s really busy here tonight, and I am one of the very few servers.’

‘Sorry, just one question. Is she there? Can you see her?’

‘Huh?’ the server said, confused. ‘Well, I do see the singers near the stage. I think she is there.’

‘What does she look like?’

‘Sorry, sir, I hate to be rude but you want me to take your name down for reservations or something? Can’t help you with much else.’

‘Yes, just one last thing. Does she look Indian? It’s really important. Please.’

‘Hold on,’ the server said.

Shailesh came up to me as I was on hold. He gave me a glass of champagne. I gestured a thanks to him. He gave me a puzzled look, wondering who I was calling at this time.

The wait seemed endless.

‘Nothing, it is the travel agency who booked my return tickets,’ I

whispered to Shailesh, making up whatever I could on the spot.

‘This late?’ he said, surprised. I shrugged and excused myself to step aside.

‘Sir? You there?’ The man was back.

‘Yes, yes. I am.’

‘She’s definitely not Caucasian white. She isn’t black either. She could be Indian. Or I don’t know, she’s quite light-coloured, so maybe Spanish or mixed-race. Sorry, I can’t...’

I interrupted him.

‘Thanks. That’s enough. I’m coming down. Can you hold a place for one? I’m Madhav’

Maad-what?’

‘Just put me down as M. I’m coming.’

‘You better be here soon. The acts end at midnight.’

Shailesh stood right in front of me.

‘All okay with your ticket?’ he said.

‘Yeah. It’s fine,’ I said and paused before I spoke again. ‘Shailesh, I need to get out,’

‘Wha...?’

‘Exactly,’ I said, ‘That’s where I need to go.’

‘Where?’

‘I need to get some fresh air.’

‘Have you seen the snow outside? Where are you going?’

He pointed to his balcony. Blobs of snow covered the ledge.

Outside his apartment, a steady stream of snowflakes shot down from the night sky.

‘I have a jacket,’ I said.

Shailesh looked bewildered by my sudden desire for a night stroll.

‘Madhav, what do I tell the guests?’ he said.

‘They will barely notice,’ I said and left.

I stepped out of the apartment building. Cold winds slashed at my face. My phone showed the time as 11.12 p.m. and a temperature of 20 degrees Fahrenheit, or -6.6 degrees Celsius. People were all bundled up in gloves, caps and jackets, i saw a group of four friends walk towards the 86th Street subway ahead of me.

Fresh snow had made the pavements powdery and white. The group of four and i reached the subway stop. We took the steps down to the metro. Some African-Americans were coming up the steps.

‘It’s not coming, woo hoo, no train tonight...’ said one of them in a drunk voice.

‘How am I going to get my ass to Brooklyn?’ his friend said.

‘A hundred-dollar cab ride, baby. That ass deserves it,’ another friend said. They all laughed.

I reached the customer services counter. A plump African-American lady from the Metropolitan Transit Authority, or MTA, sat inside. She made an announcement into a microphone.

‘Ladies and gentleman, due to heavy snow, we are experiencing huge delays on all lines. A train is stalled in the network near Grand Central. We are trying to remedy the problem. We suggest alternative travel arrangements.’

I checked the station clock: 11.19 p.m.

Google Maps suggested the subway would have taken me to Bleecker Street in seventeen minutes. From there, it was a nine-minute walk to the cafe.

‘How much delay?’ I asked the customer service officer.

‘Who knows, honey,’ she said. ‘It’s snow. Half an hour, an hour, two hours. Take your pick.’

I ran up the steps and came out of the station. Cold air sneaked in under the jacket’s collar and down my neck. The road had little traffic. I waited but no empty cab went past.

I asked a passer-by, ‘I need to go to the West Village urgently.

Where can I get a cab?’

‘Want one myself.’

I checked the time: 11.25 p.m.

‘Walk west to Fifth Avenue. You will hit Central Park. Try there,’ someone said.

I took rapid strides to Fifth Avenue. I reached the periphery of Central Park, near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Amber lights lit up the museum building. The falling snowflakes created a soft-focus effect.

Time: 11.31 p.m.

If I didn’t get a cab, I would not be able to reach West Village before midnight. I couldn’t see any cabs. I looked up at the sky to pray. Snowflakes fell on my face.

*God, please, please,* I said.

I looked around me. At least six more people waited for cabs. My heart sank. I wanted to cry.

*One cab, please,* I said, waiting for magic to happen.

No cabs.

Time: 11.34 p.m.

I reopened Google Maps. I checked the distance from my current location at the Met Museum to Cafe Wha? and chose the pedestrian option.

It displayed this: Walk 4.0 mi, 1 h 10min

The route was simple. I had to go straight down south on Fifth Avenue for 3.8 of the 4 miles, and then turn right.

‘Four miles. 6.4 kilometres,’ I mumbled to myself.

*An hour and ten minutes to walk, I thought. If I ran, it would be less. If I ran like a mad dog with a pack of wolves chasing it, even lesser.*

‘Madhav Jha,’ I whispered to myself. ‘Run.’

I remembered basketball. We used to run and dribble on court all the time.

*A basketball court is not the same as six-and-a-half kilometres in*

*minus six degrees temperature*, my sensible mind scoffed.

‘Don’t think. Don’t listen to sense. Just run,’ I told myself and took off.

I ran so fast my surroundings became hazy. Central Park on my right and posh Upper East Side homes on my left whizzed past. My face became numb in the cold air. The jacket began to feel heavy as snow started to seep inside.

I had already spent the entire day walking, whether it was for shopping, walking over to Madison Square Garden or back to Shailesh’s home. I had not eaten much all day either. My legs began to hurt.

‘C’mon Madhav,’ I panted, ‘c’mon.’

Sometimes, when nobody is by your side, you have to become your own cheering squad.

I faked a dribble. It made me go ahead to catch my imaginary ball.

I checked the street sign: 67th Street. Cafe Wha? was near 4th.

‘Don’t look at street signs. Just run, Madhav,’ I said aloud.

I passed a hotel on my left on 60th Street. It had an Indian flag hanging above the main porch.

‘The Pierre: A Taj Hotel,’ a sign said.

The Indian flag unleashed a fresh wave of energy in me.

‘Run,’ I said to myself. ‘You can do this.’

I reached the most famous part of Fifth Avenue, with designer stores on both sides. Tiffany’s was on 57th Street, Louis Vuitton on 51st. Riya’s journals had mentioned these brands.

On 50th Street, I developed a nasty cramp in my stomach. I had to stop. I sat down in a squat and took a few deep breaths.

Time: 11.44 p.m.

‘Damn. There is no time. Feel the pain later,’ I told myself.

I couldn’t move. I scanned the street for cabs. Nothing. I winced in pain.

On my right, I saw the NBA store. The store was shut. It had a huge poster of Kobe Bryant outside. ‘NBA—where amazing happens,’

it said.

‘C’mon, Madhav. Be amazing.’

I stood up. Without thinking, I started to run again.

My legs and abdomen screamed with pain. My nose felt like ice.

However, my head felt like fire. I ran, almost jumped with every stride, and looked straight ahead. Snow was in my sneakers, turning my feet cold and wet.

‘Run, run, run,’ I whispered with every breath I reached a dead end at Washington Square Park.

‘I’m close. Right turn from here.’

Time: 11.56 p.m.

I wanted to rest for a minute.

‘No rest,’ I scolded myself.

I turned right and ran.

The noise of music and the crowd outside made me stop.

Cafe Wha? The lit-up sign greeted me with its bright yellow letters. I pumped my fists.



I plonked my elbows on the ushers desk outside. I tried to speak. Snow fell out of my mouth.

‘M,’ I gasped. ‘I booked a place for Mr M.’

I bent to cough. As my body shook, bits of snow fell off me.

‘Easy there, M. Are you all right?’

I nodded.

‘Your lips are purple. They may fall off, buddy,’ the usher said.

I rubbed my hands and placed them on my mouth. Cold hands did little to warm up an even colder face.

The usher went through his register.

‘Mr M, yes. But the show is almost ending. It’s midnight. Last song probably.’

Time: 12.01 a.m.

‘The singer is still there, right?’ I said, still huffing and puffing as I spoke.

‘Hull? Yeah, maybe just doing a bonus song or something. Entry is eight dollars, two drinks minimum. You sure?’

I slapped a twenty-dollar bill on his desk and walked in. I reached the bar area.

‘Your two drinks, sir?’ said a female bartender.

‘Water and water.’

She gave me two bottles of water. I chugged them down in a flash.

‘Where is the performance?’ I said.

‘Straight left to the concert area. Follow the music.’

I limped ahead. My legs had given way. I held on to bar stools and i hairs to keep myself from falling.

The concert area was a dimly lit room filled with people. The crowd in front of me prevented me from seeing the stage.

I elbowed my way through the hordes of people to get ahead.

I heard a female voice.

*‘You’re beautiful. You’re beautiful.’*

*You're beautiful, it's true.'*

The bright spotlight on the stage contrasted with the dark room. It took a few seconds to spot the singer.

It was her.

Riya.

The water bottle fell from my hand.

She sang with her eyes closed, completely engrossed in the song. In a full-length, sequined black gown she looked more beautiful than what even God would define as beautiful.

*Yes, Riya Somani, I found you.*

She held an acoustic guitar in her hand. A male American pianist accompanied her on stage. She continued to sing.

*'I saw your face in a crowded place, And I don't know what to do, 'Cause I'll never be with you.'*

My tiredness evaporated. No more aches and pain. Blood flowed through my body again. My face felt flushed and hot compared to the freezing cold a minute ago.

She sang from her heart. The crowd loved her and cheered. She opened her eyes between lines and smiled at the crowd's reaction. She had not seen me yet.

I removed my jacket and put it on a table. I walked right up ahead to the stage and stood before her.

*'You're beautiful. You're beautiful.*

*You're beautiful, it's... '*

Her voice vanished as her eyes met mine. The pianist looked at her surprised, wondering why she had missed her lines.

Riya stood up. The guitar looked unsteady in her hand.

The pianist filled the gaps with an instrumental interlude.

Riya put her guitar aside slowly. I continued to look at her.

We stood before each other, silent and frozen. The crowd began to murmur, wondering what was happening.

The pianist figured something was amiss. He took the rnic and continued the song.

*'You're beautiful, it's true.'*

I just kept looking at her.

*What all you made me go through, Riya Somani,* my eyes said.

*I'm sorry,* her eyes said to me. A tear ran down her cheek. Mine too.

I thought I would have so much to say to her when I finally met her. I had mentally rehearsed it many times. I would be angry at first.

I would shout, tell her how much she had put me through. I would then tell her what she meant to me. How I was not that jerk, Rohan. Or that others may have let her down, but I wouldn't. And that my mother could only be happy if I was. I had my speech all planned.

However, neither of us said a word.

We just looked at each other and cried, and cried. After some time she stepped forward. That is all Riya Somani does. She gives you a little clue she is ready. You just need to be alert enough to pick it up. I opened my arms. They shook as she came closer. I took her in my arms.

'I... I'm sorry...' she said.

'Shh,' I said. 'Remember you placed a condition last time? No questions asked twice. I have one now.'

'What?' she said in the softest whisper.

'No questions at all. In fact, if possible, no words.'

She buried her face in my chest. I lifted her chin.

'Riya Somani, I love you. Always have. Always will. Please, never, ever leave me.'

She shook her head and said, 'I won't...I can't...'

I continued, 'Shh... Because next time I will find you again and kill you.'

She smiled and cried at the same time Some of the crowd cheered, even though they were confused about what was going on. The pianist ended the song. The restaurant staff switched on the concert room lights. People began to make their way out.

I continued to hold her.

‘Sorry, I left because I got scared... ’ she said.

‘I know.’

‘But how did you...?’ she said.

‘I said, no questions.’

‘Just one last one.’

‘What?’

‘Why is your shirt so wet and cold?’ she said. I laughed.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Nothing.’

'Upper West, 70th and 6th,' she said.

We were in a black Lincoln car, which the organizers had arranged for the singers. The car took us to her apartment on the Upper West Side near the western side of Central Park. I can't remember much of the journey except her face and the way it looked in the changing lights. And that the city seemed more beautiful than any other night in the past three months. I clasped her hand tightly and leaned back on the seat, just looking at her face.

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She turned the key and we were in her apartment. There were music posters all over the walls. The window faced the park, now dark, apart from the streetlights. She went to the bedroom to remove her makeup.

In the bathroom I undressed and noticed the bruises and blisters on my feet. My nose and ears looked raw and red. I took a hot shower. I felt like a pack of frozen peas being thawed.

I finished my shower and realized I did not have fresh clothes. A pink oversized T-shirt with a Dora cartoon hung in the bathroom. Perhaps Riya used it as nightwear. I put on the T-shirt, wrapped a towel around my waist and stepped out.

Riya laughed as she saw me in the girly T-shirt.

'Sorry, I didn't...' I said.

She silenced me with a kiss. Her lips felt like warm honey. She kissed me for a long time, holding my face in her hands. Our tongues gently touched. I placed my left hand on her cheek. My right hand kept my towel in place.

She guided my right hand to her back. Her gown was backless, and I felt smooth skin.

She removed my pink T-shirt. I tried to remove her gown but it was too complex a garment for me to understand. I tugged at it, and then gave up.

She unzipped a side zipper and stepped out of it.

We embraced. We kissed. We touched. We caressed. We reached the bedroom, the bed. Our lips never stopped kissing. Our hands never stopped touching.

Every moment felt special as we made love. I entered her, and our eyes met. Both of us felt strong and vulnerable at the same time. I saw tears in her eyes.

‘You okay?’ I said.

She nodded. She brought her face close to my ear to whisper.

‘More than okay. I’m great,’ she said. ‘And you?’

‘More than great,’ I said.

We cuddled afterwards. She slept. I didn’t. I looked at her all night. I realized this only when daylight seeped in through the windows. I turned towards her. Her skin glowed in the morning light. Her eyebrows were still perfect. Her eyes were shut.

‘You sleeping?’ I asked her.

She nodded.

# Epilogue

## Three and a half years later

‘It’s easily one of the best schools I have seen,’ I said.

‘It was not like this seven years ago,’ Madhav said.

I finished the tour of the Dumraon Royal School. Madhav had invited me as the chief guest for their annual day function.

I passed a music class, from where high-pitched notes could be heard. Madhav knocked on the door.

‘Riya, Chetan sir,’ Madhav whispered.

‘Please don’t call me sir,’ I said.

‘Sorry,’ Madhav said.

Riya stepped out. Madhav had not lied about her looks. She had classic features and an elegant demeanour.

‘Chetan sir, finally. Madhav has talked so much about you,’ Riya said.

‘No sir. And, trust me, Madhav has told me a lot about you too.’

She laughed. Madhav told her to finish the class and meet us outside.

‘It’s lovely here,’ I said. We walked out of the main building into the school garden. Students had decorated the new basketball court with flowers. A function to inaugurate the court was scheduled for later in the evening.

‘We wanted to call you earlier, but thought it better to invite you here when we had a basketball court,’ Madhav said.

‘The court is beautiful.’

‘All the equipment is from the US,’ Madhav said. ‘Riya and I spend three months there every year. She does a few music gigs. I help out at the UN and also do some marketing of my rural tours.’

Madhav explained how they had started rural school tours, which included a stay in the haveli. People came from all over the world, allowing the school to earn revenue in dollars.

‘Tourists spend a day with our kids. They teach them a class, share pictures or talk about their country. They say it is one of the most meaningful things they have ever done in their life.’

‘That’s innovative.’

‘Students love it. They get an exposure to the world. Many tourists send regular grants or gifts to the school later on.’

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘She’ll come soon. She spends less time at the school now. Riya and I run it. Shyam keeps Rani Sahiba busy.’ Madhav laughed.

‘She is okay about Riya?’ I said.

‘You forget that she saw how I had become without her. She says she is happy to have her son back. Not to mention grandson. Her new darling.’

‘How old is your son now?’

‘Will turn two soon,’ Madhav said. ‘Here they come.’

I saw an elderly lady walk towards us holding a little boy’s hand in one hand and a large tiffin box in another.

The school bell rang. Hordes of kids ran out. Riya joined us.

‘Everyone’s here,’ she said.

Shyam extracted his hand from his grandmothers and came running up to his parents. He looked like a chubby baby version of Riya.

‘Shyam is too tall and too naughty for his age,’ Rani Sahiba said when Madhav had introduced us.

We sat in the amphitheatre seats of the basketball court. Riya served everyone a lunch of chapats, daal and carrot-and-peas subzi from the tiffin box.

Shyam saw a basketball on court. He ran down the amphitheatre steps for the ball.

‘Careful,’ Rani Sahiba said.

‘He’s your daredevil grandson,’ Riya said.

Shyam took the ball in his hand.

‘Shoot,’ Riya said.



Shyam took a shot. His little hands couldn't throw the ball high enough to reach anywhere near the basket. He tried two more times and failed.

He looked at his father.

'It's not happening,' he said.

'So what? Don't quit. It will happen one day,' Madhav said.

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girlfriend

My phone beeped. I had a new message. My heart beat fast as I  
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‘Phil, do you want to?’ Mr Gates said.

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