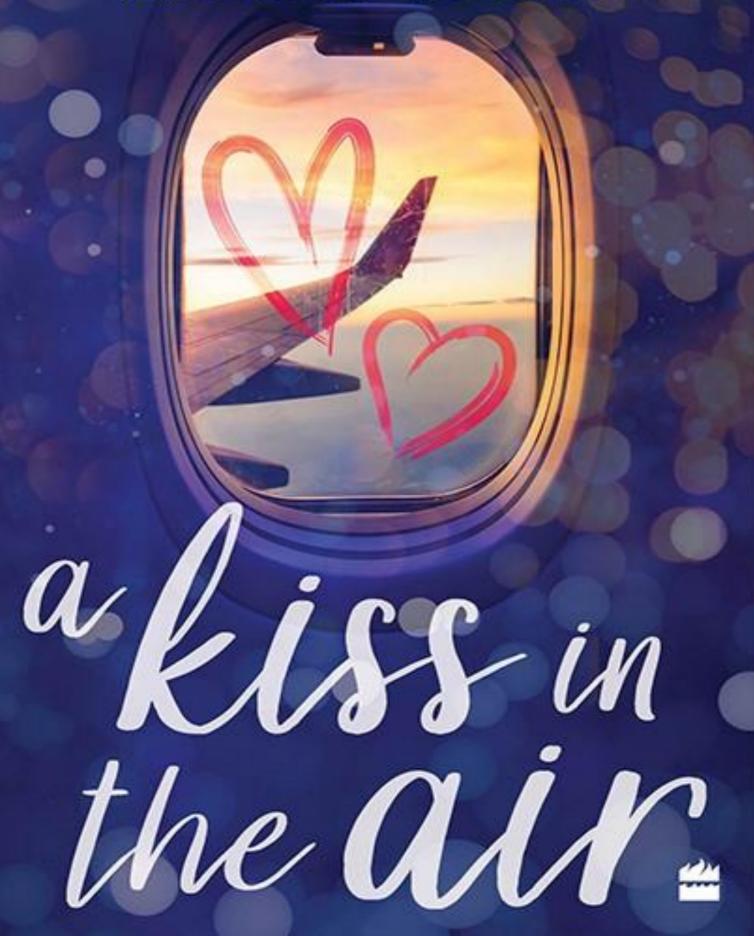
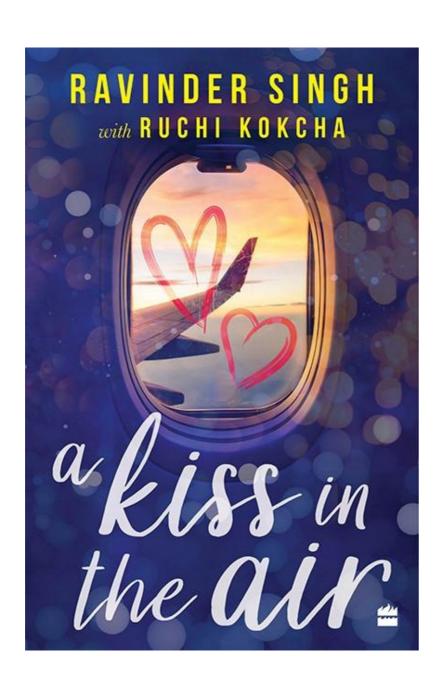
RAVINDER SINGH with RUCHI KOKCHA





A Kiss in the Air

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A Kiss in the Air

It was the rarest of days, and I can say that with the utmost conviction because, until then, never in my life had I ever managed to reach the airport on time. That day, I even had the luxury of requesting my driver to keep the car running for an extra five minutes after we'd pulled up at the airport terminal. I know you want to know why! Well, I wanted the song playing on the radio to finish. 'Aye ajnabi tu bhi kabhi aawaz de kahin se' — it's one of my all-time favourites. Once it was over, I got down from the cab. The driver smiled at me and drove away. I could see in his smile that he was secretly thinking I was an idiot, but that was all right with me.

It was afternoon. I walked at a snail's pace towards Departure Gate Number 3, which was right across from where the cab had dropped me. I was in no hurry at all. I knew that I had ample time, and the fact that I was going home to fresh air and clear water, away from the toxicity of Delhi, filled me with joy. I always found peace in my hometown of Siliguri. I guess it was the slowness of life there, and how every moment could be cherished and cared for, that gave life a magical sheen; something the metropolitans could never boast of.

In my happy high state, I bumped into a trolley that was still being loaded with bags.

'Ouch!' I cried out as the person whose trolley I had crashed into bent down to pick up a bag that had fallen off from the impact. My jaw dropped. In front of me was a girl who was breathtakingly gorgeous. Realizing that I was staring at her, I rearranged my expression to make it look as if I was still in pain from the collision. I didn't want to give her the impression that I was totally floored by her beauty.

'Hey, are you all right?' There was genuine concern in her voice, and it struck an immediate chord with me. Her soft voice made the words so gentle and caressing, I could almost taste them on my tongue.

'I am okay,' I managed to say. 'Thanks. And ... uh ... sorry,' I muttered.

She smiled and started walking, pushing her trolley in front of her. I noticed that she was headed to the same gate that I was. Had she not, I would have changed course. I would obviously have changed course too. I watched as she walked in front of me, her tall frame with long legs ending in white sneakers moving gracefully. Her chocolate hair was long, reaching her waist. I couldn't stop looking at her. To take my eyes off her was to deny myself God-given pleasure. Dressed in the simplest of jackets and plain track pants to go with it, she barely had any makeup on. From behind her, I noticed how her track pants clung to her shapely legs. As we drew closer to the gate, I began to feel conscious of the fact that I might appear like stalker to her, and so I picked up pace and passed her, joining the queue in front of gate number 3. I was hoping she would come to the gate at the same time as me, and I would be able to look at her a little longer, but she stopped to receive a phone call.

Damn, what timing! I thought, a bit agitated looking at the people adding up in the queue behind me. Even if she joined the queue now, the gap between us was going to be a big one.

Should I make some excuse and step out? I thought to myself, but then, God knows why, I chose to stay put.

By the time she got off the call, more than a dozen people had joined the queue behind me.

You want to know the adverse impact it had on my fortune? Well, she glanced at Gate Number 4, where there were only half a dozen folks in total. At a drop of a hat, she rolled her trolley towards it. My heart sank.

She didn't even acknowledge my presence, despite our recent albeit brief run-in. That hurt me as much as the growing distance between us. I watched her walk away from me.

I kept looking in her direction till it was my turn to show the security personnel my flight ticket.

With a frown, irritated that I had to take my eyes off the girl, I handed him the printout of my ticket.

'And your ID please,' he reminded me in a stern voice. I reached for my wallet in the back pocket, took out my driver's licence and passed it to him.

The next time I looked at Gate Number 4, she was gone. What a blow that was! She'd been right there just moments ago. The security personnel handed me my ID and ticket and I entered the terminal. Immediately, I began scanning the place for her.

The place was packed. It seemed like all of Delhi had decided to fly somewhere on t he same day. As I cut through the crowd, I searched for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. Even as I hoped to spot her, I was surprised at the way I was behaving – like a silly teenager! I was definitely not lusting after her There was something about that woman; her aura had me bewitched. It was as if some mystical tune was being played and I couldn't help but follow the music. Losing that music would be like losing my very source of joy.

A while later, having had no luck, I dragged myself towards my check-in counter with a heavy heart. I stood right at the beginning of the queue for the boarding pass. After a long wait, when the passenger ahead of me at the counter eventually got his boarding pass, it was my turn to step forward. But just then I froze, for I had finally struck gold. There she was! Walking in my direction. I looked beyond and up above her. The overhead signboard read Ladies' Washroom. Ah, well! I see!

Even though it wasn't me she had been seeking, this tiny sighting of her had reignited the fire inside me. I wanted to step away from the queue, forget all about my boarding pass and go looking for her before I lost her again. I wanted to ignore the long, ever-growing queue snaking behind me, crowded with trolleys and passengers. But right then, the lady at the counter called out to me in an impatient voice.

I had no choice. I could notice that the people behind me were growing restless. I walked to the counter, but my mind was preoccupied with the thought of that girl. I was least interested in answering my seat preference.

'Anything will do,' I answered when the woman at the counter asked me for it.

'I have given you a window seat, sir,' she said and smiled at me.

'Thank you,' I said, trying to sound polite, though I was distracted, trying to catch sight of the girl as she emerged from the washroom. But I was too late. The crowd swelled and even a second of taking my eyes off her had cost me. I had lost her again.

I hoped that I'd catch a glimpse of her on the other side of the security checkpoint, which was where I had to head to now. Despite the atheist in me, I had even begun to pray for it to happen. And guess what? There she was, right beside me, joining the ladies' queue parallel to my queue at the security check. Holy shit! My heart raced like a Ferrari. Her trolley was gone, and as the queue inched closer to the conveyor belt, I watched, mesmerized, as she placed her handbag on it. She was holding her boarding pass in her hand. I squinted and craned my neck, trying to figure out where she was headed to, but I couldn't. The men's line was longer and the distance between us had grown as her queue moved faster. I wondered if she remembered me bumping into her trolley outside the airport. Perhaps not. It probably meant nothing to her. Then I began to wonder about where she was travelling to. Could it be Siliguri? I mean, what were the odds? God! Why was I acting like this? I had never done something

like this before! I almost wanted to slap myself to bring back some sanity in me. A lady officer from a distance waved at her and pointed at her jacket. She would have to remove it, I thought. A satanic smile came onto my lips seeing her doing what I had just thought about. She complied, holding her boarding pass between her lips and looking adorable as she did so. The second she took off her jacket, she blew my mind. Her figure, which had been hidden by the jacket, was shapely and toned. She was wearing a fitted black top that accentuated her curves. hadn't been so already, I'd have definitely been bowled over by now. Up close, though, I also noticed something that I hadn't earlier. She seemed tired, almost exhausted, and for the first time I noticed that she had dark circles under her beautiful eyes. She kept her jacket in the tray and rejoined the security queue. From the corner of my eye, I watched her; I didn't want to lose her again. I wanted to talk to her, and I kept running through smart opening lines with which I could impress her. I thought then I would find out her name, and once I knew her name, I'd be able to find her on Facebook or Instagram and send her a friend request. But for all this, I needed a good opening line.

Meanwhile, much to my dismay, the ladies' queue continued to move faster than the men's, and the distance between us continued to grow. I was getting restless now, bouncing on my feet. I wanted to just run past the security checkpoint and go talk to her. As she went through the check, I was still waiting on this side on it, with four men before me. And as if it wasn't enough, the man ahead of me in the queue went for the check with his wallet in his pocket. So now he had to do the whole thing again - come back, put his wallet on the scanner belt and walk back in before me. Fucking Idiot! I wish being an arsehole was a crime. Fuming, I waited for my turn while she collected her bag, put her jacket back on and walked away from me. I saw her get swallowed by the sea of humanity and my heart sank. Not again!

After the security check, I walked from shop to shop, checked out every eatery and scanned the faces of the crowd of passengers. How do you vanish so easily into thin air? I asked her in my head. Disappointed, I walked towards my boarding gate. What was I even thinking? That I would be able to pursue a random stranger in an airport, just because I was overwhelmingly attracted to her? When does that sort of thing ever happen in reality? On my way to the boarding gate, I saw a poster of my favourite author's latest release. Did I tell you I am a sucker for books? Well, the airport bookstore claimed to have signed copies of his new book. Honestly, that was one tiny bit of joy in what was turning out to be an otherwise disappointing day.

Finally, something that will take my mind off her, I thought to myself. I picked up a signed copy and went straight to the billing counter. Bingo! There she was, exiting the bookstore from the other end. Are you playing hide & seek with me? I asked her mentally.

Scared to lose her again, I was about to leave that book and instead chase her, but the next second I noticed she held a copy of same novel in her hand.

U-N-B-E-L-I-E-V-A-B-L-E!

It suddenly made a lot more sense for me to buythat book – this book, by my favourite author, was going to be our common ground. It was going to help me begin a conversation with her. Yes! I finally had a plan! I was elated. As I stood at the cash counter of the bookstore, waiting for my turn, several thoughts raced through my mind. *She reads*, I thought to myself. *Wow!* My heart danced inside my chest.

Maybe he is her favourite author too. Oh boy! I couldn't wait to face her, for I now knew exactly what I was going to say to her.

Two people who read the same things are bound to connect with each other. Nothing can go wrong when you have similar taste in books.

Then, suddenly, as I reached the counter and gave my book to the cashier, I saw her reach the T-point, take a left turn and vanish from my line of sight. Panicking, I asked the cashier to hurry up. Poor guy. He was being prompt enough; it was the credit card machine that was taking its own sweet time. I consoled myself with the fact that I'd at least seen where she was headed. I knew it was towards the boarding gates, and I was headed there too. My gate was left from the T-point as well.

As soon as the transaction was approved, I grabbed the book and ran – literally!

I got to the T-point and took a sharp left, and skidded to a stop. There she was. It had been relatively easy to trace her this time. She was walking away from me, some distance away. I didn't want to scare her by running after her, so I slowed down to a brisk walk, making sure that I maintained a little distance between us. As I approached her, a sudden chill of misgiving ran through me.

What if she found out that I had been stalking her right from the moment I collided with her trolley? Would that make me a bad person in her eyes?

The other half of my brain rejected the idea; it encouraged me to take my chance. After all, she was going to get on a flight soon. I might never see her again. So what was the harm in trying my luck?

Her feet paused. She looked back. I froze. In my nervousness, I turned towards the boarding gate on my right. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* I hated myself. My daredevil plan had come crashing down just with one look. *Loser!* I looked at the number of the gate I'd turned to. Interestingly, it was 45A, the boarding gate for my Siliguri flight. I slowly walked towards the seats in the waiting area. I could still see her from the corner of my

eye, but I didn't want to look at her directly. I grabbed an empty corner seat in the front row and sat down. Then, to my surprise, I noticed her staring in my direction. She looked back at her boarding pass and then again towards me. *Oh boy!* I found myself grinning in joy as I watched her walk towards my gate. She took a seat across the aisle from me, and I thought, If this isn't a sign, what is? I swear I could have kneeled right then and there. The girl I had wanted to be able to get just a glimpse of was actually going to Siliguri, to my hometown, in the same flight as me! I could have never imagined something like this happening to me, even in my wildest dreams!

I opened the book and held it up so that my face was partially hidden from her. I pretended to read it.

My mind was not on the black-and-white words before me, but on her.

She looked at her watch and then, after considering something, took out her laptop, switched it on, put on earphones and began typing. As I had noticed before, she really did look exhausted. Intermittently, she would close her eyes and put her head back, before getting back to work. It appeared as if she needed a nap.

All this while, not once did she look in my direction. And throughout, the page of the novel in my hand didn't turn. Twenty minutes later, the airline representatives announced that they were starting boarding. They asked the passengers seated in the last ten rows to come up first, and I noticed her getting up. I immediately got up and joined the queue, right behind her. It was a now-ornever moment for me. Then I noticed that her copy of the book wasn't in her hands' any longer. She must have slipped it inside her handbag.

God, she smelled nice. I inhaled deeply, the beachy, breezy scent of her perfume filling my senses. I felt as if all the pores on my body had opened up just to soak in her fragrance.

'Hi,' I said, gathering all my courage. I confess that I felt hot and cold, and could feel myself shaking.

It seemed like she hadn't heard me, so I tried again. 'Hi there,' I repeated, slightly louder this time.

She turned back. She was squinting against the sunlight streaming in from the large glass windows, and as she turned, she pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger, like she had a severe headache.

'Hi,' she replied, opening her eyes wider, something that seemed to physically hurt her. 'Are you all right?' I asked, abandoning what I had intended to do.

She was silent for a few seconds, and then she finally nodded slowly. 'Yes, thank you. I'm fine.' She didn't look it, though. Even so, I decided to carry on with my initial opening line.

'I noticed you had also bought ...' I began, but my voice was drowned by hers as she excused herself and closed her eyes, adding, 'Please, just give me a minute.' She turned around before I could say anything.

'Sure,' I said softly to her back.

She pulled out a water bottle from her bag, and swallowed a pill. By then, she had got to the head of the line and was asked by one of the ground staff members at the gate for her boarding pass. She took it out and passed it to the man, and then turned to me.

Shaking her head, she said, 'I am so sorry, you were saying something?' But before I could reply, the ground staff had waved her in and was asking me for my boarding pass. I took it out and showed it to the man, who immediately asked me to step out of the queue and wait for my turn.

'Sir, you will be called in the next lot. We've only started boarding for the last ten rows.'

Frustrated, I pleaded with him. 'Come on! It doesn't matter,' I said.

'Sorry, sir.' He was firm.

'Okay, listen. Just let me go through now and I will stand till you've finished seating the last ten rows.' 'Sorry, sir,' he repeated himself. The passengers behind me were all looking at me now. *She* was looking at me. Damn! I had ended up embarrassing myself in front of her.

'See ya,' she said, pursing her lips before she walked through the gate.

Dejected, I stepped out of the queue, cursing the airline official with all sorts of ailments.

A while later, when I finally entered the plane, my eyes immediately began searching for her. My own seat was somewhere in the middle section. I found her seated six rows behind me. Her eyes were closed. I entered my row. I had a window seat, remember?

I felt irritated as I looked out of the window. The kid within me, who would have enjoyed the fluffy clouds in the bright blue sky, was long gone. What I wanted to enjoy was her company, but that seemed impossible. A middle-aged South Indian man came and dropped his bag on the aisle seat of my row. He didn't sit down, but stood there instead, speaking loudly to a few passengers behind me. I couldn't understand a word he was saying. My mind was already in a turmoil, and his loud chatter pissed me off more. In that moment, who knew that sixty seconds later, I'd be overwhelmed by gratitude towards the very man.

It turned out that he was a part of an extended family that was travelling together. They all wanted to sit next to each other on that flight, and in order to do that, all he needed was to trade his seat with that of the girl ... yes, you got that right, *that very girl*! Someone from his family, sitting behind her, asked her if she'd trade seats. And she said yes!

My heart somersaulted in my chest. I couldn't contain my excitement. Was this really happening? The whole thing was beyond my understanding. I was beginning to have faith in God. In that moment, I sincerely believed that this flight was going to change my life. The South Indian gentleman, bless him, went with his bag, and she came up the aisle instead. She put her bag in the overhead compartment and sat down in the aisle seat. There was no one in the middle seat between us.

I was still in a state of utter bewilderment over what had just happened. I noticed that she didn't look at me. I opened the book once again, hoping that she'd at least notice that. This time, it did work. She looked at it, and then at me. I could feel her eyes on me, but I continued to fake read for a few minutes, just to make sure she didn't think I was only holding the book for show.

Then I finally turned my head and looked at her. I smiled. She smiled back but then turned away again. I

wondered if she remembered that I had been trying to talk to her at the boarding gate. It didn't seem like she did. Time and again I kept shifting between staring at her and my book. I wished she would pull out her own copy of the novel and we would have something to talk about. Occasionally, she noticed me noticing her and then, at one point, she knitted her eyebrows and looked at me full in the face. Worried she was angry, I felt my heart stop, and then she smiled and I let out a sigh of embarrassed relief.

'Hi,' she said.

'Hello,' I managed to reply.

'Do you mean to say something to me?'

'Ah, no! Oh ... I mean, yes! Yes! Are you alright?' I was stuttering and stumbling over my words like a fool.

'What do you mean by that?' she asked, her eyebrows furrowed again. Oh God! What am I doing?

'No, I mean outside in the queue, we were talking, and I guess you had this headache ... sort of ... you know.' Ohhh,' she said and smiled as an acknowledgement.

I was happy that I had been able to put that in a way would remind her that this wasn't the first time we were talking to each other. I patted myself on the back for that one. 'Yes ... I have a condition. But don't worry, I am fine,' she assured me.

'Okay! Okay!' I nodded three times, once with each okay, and cringed inwardly. I was making a complete fool of myself. I kept staring at her too, wanting for her to speak more, because it seemed like I'd lost my voice.

And then, thankfully, she did. 'You know what, I bought that same book from the airport bookstore,' she said, pointing at the book in my hand. Her voice was lighter than it had been before.

Seeing her look at me like that there were no butterflies in my stomach. There were dragons. And they were playing havoc inside me.

'Oh, you did?' I said, surprising myself by actually being able to sound casual and smooth. Inside, I was shouting with joy.

Did you buy the signed copy?' I went on.'Oh! They had signed ones?' she exclaimed, sounding dismayed. 'I didn't notice! I just picked up a copy from the shelf. I haven't opened it yet. Maybe it's signed too? Let me check.'

I watched her as she pulled out her bag from the overhead compartment. Her jacket lifted slightly as she reached for it, showing a sliver of her waist. Suddenly consumed with shyness, I lowered my eyes.

Along with the book, she had also pulled out her laptop bag. She sat back and opened the first page of the book in her hands. She left her bag in the middle seat. 'Oh, no! It isn't signed.' She made a sad face, her lips pulled down.

'It's all right. You can take mine,' I immediately offered. I was trying to be her knight in shining armour, and if it meant giving her a signed copy of a book, I was as ready as I could be.

'No, no, I can't accept that, please! I should have been more attentive. Perhaps this was my only chance of getting a signed copy of a book by my favourite author. I missed it. But then, that's life.' She forced herself to smile as she said the words.

I could not see her sad. I pulled her copy from her hands and placed mine in them.

'There. That is yours now.' I wanted to see that beautiful smile back on her lips.

It worked. She smiled from ear to ear.

'Thank you. This means a lot to me,' she said, keeping the book inside the magazine holder in front of her seat

Meanwhile, the plane had reached the runway and was racing up it. In less than a minute, we were airborne.

After the din of the take-off had subsided, I turned away from the window and introduced myself to her.

'I am Abhi. As in Abhishek. Abhishek Verma,' 'I am nobody.' She giggled as if she had pulled some prank on me. I wanted to know her name; in fact, I needed her full name so that I could find her on social media. This was why I had mentioned my full name too, hoping that she'd reciprocate with hers.

'Very philosophical! But I would have preferred a name,' I said.

'Does it matter? And as Shakespeare said, "What's in a name?" She opened her laptop and typed in the password.

A word document flashed on the screen. She began typing.

I watched her work for a few minutes, and then couldn't hold back.

'Are you a writer?' I asked.

'Do you always ask so many questions?' she retorted.

'No,' I said, embarrassed, and then added with a puppy-face, 'I am sorry.'

She looked at me. 'Chill,' she said, chuckling.

I began to see that she was a carefree soul. She was a stranger, but she made me feel comfortable.

'So, are you a writer?' I asked again.

'Mmmmm ... Yes and no,' she said. 'Yes, because I am writing a story. No, because I have never written a book before.'

'So you *are* writing a book!' I exclaimed, a smile on my face.

She nodded. She nodded.

'What is it about?' I asked, curious, but also to keep the conversation going.

She looked taken aback, as if I had asked a difficult question – something that would require her to uncover her soul. For a second, she said nothing.

'It's a story of a girl who is dying,' she finally replied.

'Oh, a sad story! What disease is she suffering from?'

'Does it matter?'

'Is that your favourite line?' I countered.

She burst into laughter and I laughed along with her.

'We all die. Death is an inevitable part of life. There is nothing sad about it. In fact my story is a story of hope. Before she leaves, she wants to spend all her money seeing the world. And she wants to fulfill one wish of every random person she meets on her journey. We always think of our own family and friends, but we rarely think about other people. We all have wishes and desires, no? And that's the exciting part.'

'Hmmm ...that's interesting,' I was genuinely fascinated, and I wanted to know more about her story.

'Do you mind telling me the story on this long flight?' I asked.

She hesitated, and then nodded with a smile.

'What?' I asked, confused.

'I do mind, actually,' she said.

'Why?'

'Because if I have to tell you, I have to kill you,' she said with a chuckle.

I laughed too, and taking a cue from her story, said, 'Okay, kill me, but fulfil my one wish before you do so.'

'Which is?'

'Listening to this story.'

'Oh come on, it's not as if I am some master storyteller! And anyway, you can wait for the book to be out,' she said.

'Hmmm ...' I pursed my lips and looked away, staring outside my window.

I watched the fluffy, pristine layer of white clouds beneath me. Up above, the infinite sky was bright blue. I heard her voice again.

'But I can try and fulfill any other wish of yours,' she whispered from behind me.

I rolled my eyes and turned around to see if she was serious. 'What, really?' I asked.

All kinds of crazy thoughts began racing through my head. I concealed them behind a smile.

'Mmm ... hmmm,' she said, nodding.

'And why would you do that?'

'As a consolation for denying you the permission to listen to my story,' she replied, her eyes bright.

'Okayyy,' I said slowly, swallowing the lump in the back of my throat. 'So ... any wish?' I asked, aware that

my wicked smile was a hint in itself.

'Well, any wish, as long as I can fulfil it,' she said, raising her eyebrows. Her eyes widened, and the expression on her face, though playful, let me know that I wasn't to cross any lines.

I smiled at her, and with gratitude for her in my eyes, I let out a sigh and said, 'I will let the opportunity pass this time, but thank you.'

'Oh come on. Try me. Seriously.'

And then, before I could reply, she added, 'But don't ask for materialistic things or...' She lowered her voice, looking cute as she leaned towards me and whispered, 'Sex'.

'And hey, it has to be something that I can do for you during this flight only. The option expires as soon as the plane lands,' she finished.

How easily she had said sex in our conversation! I was blown away by her carefree nature. 'Okay,' I nodded, agreeing happily to her conditions. Secretly, I was still celebrating the fact that she had mentioned sex. I started thinking, seriously thinking, about what I wanted from her. And oddly, nothing came to mind. It was strange that when the girl I'd been chasing through an airport just a while back asked me to make a wish she was ready to fulfil, I couldn't come up with one.

As I gazed outside my window at the vast sky, trying to come up with something, I heard her speak again. 'Think about something you have never shared, never done, never asked.

That might help.'That helped, and finally, I zeroed down on something which I thought I could ask for, though I risked hearing a no from her.

'A kiss! I have never kissed a girl.' The words flew out of my mouth.

'What?' she said, turning from her laptop to me.

I felt hot with embarrassement.

'How old are you?' she asked.

'Twen..ty..se..ven,' I said slowly, almost apologetically.

'And you have *never* kissed a girl?' she asked.

I averted my eyes, faced the seat in front of me and shook my head. It was my truth. But then, why would she believe my truth? Why would she believe that a twenty-seven-year-old man had never kissed a girl?

'On second thoughts, I am going to change my wish to something else ...' I blurted out, and was going to speak again when she cut me off.

'I believe you,' she said simply.

'You do?' I was surprised.

'Most men would find it embarrassing to own up to this. That, and your body language, makes me believe.'

Her words made me feel embarrassed again and I turned away from her, unable to meet her eyes.

'So you have never had a girlfriend?'

I looked back at her. 'Once! She was my girlfriend for a week,' I said.

'What happened after that week?'

'It turned out that I was the result of a dare she had been given by her friends.'

'Oh! Poor you.' There was empathy in her eyes.

I didn't react to that, so she went on. 'Why didn't you kiss her that week?'

I smiled. 'She had asked me to wait, so I waited. But we did go on a date, you know, watched a movie and had dinner together as a couple.'

She narrowed her eyes and said, 'And let me guess, you paid for all that.'

I pursed my lips and that gave her her.

'When was this?'

'Some four years back. At my first job.'

'And you never got into a relationship after that?'

For some reason, I felt like telling her more about everything. I wanted to go beyond just what she was asking and share what was in my heart with her. I don't know why; we barely knew each other, but this was beginning to feel like a much-needed healing session for me. 'Now that I have confessed to a total stranger that I have never kissed a girl, I don't think there is any reason for me not to tell you that when it comes to reaching out to a girl, I get cold feet.' I smiled and abruptly stopped.

She encouraged me to carry on. 'I am listening.'

'I think I am not confident enough,' I said.

I saw appreciation in her eyes as she looked back at me silently. There I was, a man, telling a woman that I was scared to reach out to her. 'And why are you not confident about yourself?'

'Ah ... I don't know. I think I am not that good-looking.' I hesitated, and then added, 'Most of the times, I struggle with how to even initiate a conversation. I ... I keep wondering what the girl would think of me if I fail to impress her.'

It felt liberating to say it all out loud.

'I am not that guy who lives on the edge, is adventurous and breaks the rule. I am the boring type, the kind who would follow all the rules.'

'Is that a problem? To be a rule-abiding person?' she asked.

She was curious, perhaps as interested as she would have been about her characters in the story she was writing. Who knows! 'If not a problem, it's not impressive either.' I avoided her eyes again.

'I can do it,' she said suddenly.

I turned towards her. 'What?'

'The kiss,' she said, smiling widely.

Shit! I was scared. Now that she was ready to give me what I wanted, I was getting cold feet. She was the adventurous one, but I wasn't. I looked around to see if anybody had heard her.

Be a man! Come on! My inner voice shouted at me. I swallowed the lump in my throat. 'Okay,' I said.

She couldn't ignore the horror on my face and burst into laughter.

'Are you serious?' I pressed.

'I am. What about you?'

'You can't do it here though,' I said, looking at the people around us.

'The deal is valid till the plane lands,' she reminded me, and then added, 'And mind you, this isn't the beginning of a relationship between us.'

'Okay, I get that.' My heart was thumping hard now.

'Good! Now we need to somehow move to the back of the plane,' she said, pointing with her thumb. 'Preferably the washroom.'

I looked towards the back of the plane and then back at her. 'Okay.'

'Can you say anything other than okay? Are you not excited?' she said in a low voice.

I nodded. I couldn't believe this was happening.

'Oh God!' she said. 'Then say it like you mean it.'

'Hell! I am excited!' I said, punching my right fist into my left palm.

'That's better,' she said with a smile and looked at the back of the plane.

This girl was really going to fulfil my wish. And with her, I felt like I was in safe hands. She was all that I wasn't. Breaking the rules, living on the edge and ready for adventure. The cabin crew had taken up the aisle space with their food trolley. The route leading to the back of the aeroplane was blocked. With that, the girl whose name I still didn't know saw an opportunity.

'Come after five minutes,' she said, getting up.

'Wait, what?' I asked, but she was already on her way.

I turned my head and watched her discuss something with one of the stewardesses serving food. I could make out from her body language that it was urgent. The cabin crew made space for her to pass. Closer to the washroom, she turned back to look at me. It was my turn in a while. I freaked out at the possibility of entering a washroom when I knew there was a woman inside. What would others think of me if they notice me? In that moment, it didn't occur to me what they would think of her if they notice her being inside with me.

Before entering the washroom, she had checked to see if there was any cabin crew around the rear end of the plane. There was no one. She moved inside the washroom.

I waited for some time to pass. All this while, I was thinking what I'd tell the air hostesses if they asked me to wait for a while. That my bladder couldn't wait was the only excuse that came to my mind. I got up. I could almost hear my heart beating hard inside my chest. Just when I arrived near the cabin crew's trolley, the captain switched on the seatbelt sign. I don't know why he did that. There was no turbulence. Anyway, it also meant that the usage of the lavatory was prohibited now.

'Please return to your seat, sir,' the air hostess said.
'Please, I will be quick.' I insisted, trying to rescue my fast disappearing kiss.

'Sorry sir, but you will have to ...'

'I need him, please let him help me!' Drowning the soft voice of the air hostess was this shout from the back of the plane. The girl I was to kiss stood in front of the washroom, her hand on her mouth, her torso slightly bent forward, as if she was sick.

Everyone noticed her.

'And please get my medicines from my purse!' she said. Then, with her hand still on her mouth, she rushed back inside the washroom.

Worried, the air hostess asked me if I was with her. I nodded my head.

'Okay, you can go,' she said and I immediately flung into action. I got to our seat and opened her bag placed on the middle seat. I pretended to look for the medicines. And then I actually found them. Oh boy! She seemed to be carrying an entire pharmacy in her bag.

I pulled out a random strip of pills. A folded piece of paper got pulled out along with it and fell on the seat. In my haste to not miss a second with her, I left it there and rushed to the washroom. When I reached there, I

knocked on the closed door. She opened it and smiled at me. I first looked back at the entire aircraft full of passengers and then back at her. I smiled. 'Come in fast,' she urged me.

'Shit, no!' I was suddenly afraid.

She held my collar, pulled me in and locked the door behind us.

'But listen ...' I was about to say something but she put a finger on my lips. And then she looked at me with her big, bold eyes, as if staring right into my soul. She leaned forward and put her lips on mine. I wasn't sure what to do next, so I just stayed still. She held my face within her palms and pressed her lips harder on mine. I could feel their softness, and the warmth of her breath. She held my right hand and placed it on her waist.

'Part your lips,' she murmured.

I obliged. She was my goddess.

She sucked on my lower lip. Following her lead, I started sucking her upper lip. It went on forever, the pleasure of it. She held my face tighter than before. I moaned back.

Her hand moved on the back of my neck. I held her waist tighter. I was melting under her touch. She moved her tongue into my mouth. I followed her lead again, our tongues doing their own tango.

There was barely any space in that tiny washroom and I don't know when my back pressed against the door latch and it opened. Our bodies meanwhile continued to be in each other's embrace. And then, while I was still oblivious, she suddenly pulled away from me. I opened my eyes and looked into hers. They were looking over my shoulder. I turned around and saw an air hostess standing behind us, looking in through the wide open door of the washroom. All the blood in my body rushed to my face. If horror had a face, it was mine.

And then the air hostess smiled, waved her hand at us and turned away, letting us get out. She even extended us the courtesy of walking away from us before we stepped out. It would have been embarrassing to be watched by her. I was anyway almost dead from the kiss and then from the horror.

As soon as the air hostess left, my heart began beating again. I looked at the girl I had kissed. I gave her a shy smile, and she returned it. I stepped out and walked back to my seat. On my way back, I didn't look into anyone's

eye. The girl with no name followed me after a brief while. Moments later, we sat in our respective seats.

'Thank you,' I said, looking at her.

'You are welcome,' she answered with a wink.

I was about to say something when she said, 'You will ruin the moment if you say anything about it.' I shut up. She was right.

I could sense the energy in her voice dropping again. She held her forehead and closed her eyes.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Nothing, I will take a quick nap. Exhausted!' She smiled with her eyes closed. 'Sure,' I said and left her to sleep.

We were going to land in a while. I looked out of the window and reflected upon the the past few minutes of my life. I had a lot to go through and a lot to absorb. I had received the very first kiss of my life. It was overwhelming. As a kid, would I have ever thought that one day I would grow up and receive my first kiss 30,000 feet above the ground? I was on cloud nine. Quite literally, I thought, looking out of my window. During our plane's descent, I looked at her. She was still sleeping. I was so very thankful to her. She had rained on my wildfire, soaking my soul completely. The girl on the plane had fulfilled my wish. This was an interesting story. Then, all of a sudden, my mind went back to the story she was writing, and at the same time, my eyes landed on that piece of paper that I had mistakenly pulled out of her bag. The plane was moments away from landing.

I opened it. It was a handwritten medical prescription. I struggled to read the two words circled multiple times in blue ink – glioblastoma multiforme. Underneath, in smaller fonts, I read the four words that left me in complete shock – brain tumour, last stage – it read. Before I could read any further, I noticed her hand quickly snatching the paper out of my hands.

'What do you think you are doing?' She was furious. In seconds, she folded the paper and put it inside her bag. Agape, I looked at her. This was the first time that she avoided my eyes.

I kept staring at her face. I could connect all the dots now. The story ... the story she was writing ... It was her. It was she who was dying. She was travelling the world and fulfilling wishes of random people she ran into.

This sudden transition from a daydream to a nightmare was too much for my brain to process. I was stunned. She wasn't talking anymore. Tears welled up in my eyes and by the time the plane touched down and began taxiing, they were flowing.

'Talk to me,' I said. She looked at me. I was already crying – for a stranger.

'I don't want any drama. You can't do this to me,' she said.

She had the right to demand that of me. Perhaps she had accepted her fate long back and I was only going to bring it all back.

'Okay, but at least tell me your name. Give me your number.'

She took a few seconds before speaking. 'I had told you I can't do that. I am sorry,' she said and got up to pull out her bag. People stood around us. The aisle space was flooded. We had lost our private little world.

Her reality had hit me like nothing else ever had. Holding a thousand emotions in my heart, I followed her out of the plane. At the Bagdogra airport in Siliguri, I asked her to give me a minute.

She obliged.

'How much time do you have?' I asked.

She didn't answer and turned around, walking away from me.

'You can't just walk away from me, just like that,' I shouted at her.

She turned back and said, 'Don't do that. I fulfilled your wish. Can't you fulfill mine?'

I was in tears again, and for the first time in my life, I didn't care what others would think of me. I had discovered a new confident self in that moment, someone who wasn't embarrassed to follow his heart. In that moment, all I wanted was to cry without needing to hide my face. I looked at the girl who had kissed me, walking away from me.

I ran behind her.

'I will, but if there is anything I can do for you, please, please, please reach out to me,' I begged her while pressing my visiting card into her hands.

'You can,' she said, and I waited for her to go on.

'Believe in yourself. There is someone out there who is looking out for you. All you need to do is to stop undervaluing yourself. Not everyone wants men who live on the edge and break rules. The world is not that one-sided. I enjoyed kissing you. Others will too.'

With that, she was gone. She did keep my card. She never called me.

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Ravinder Singh is the bestselling author of seven novels and two crowd-sourced anthologies. His books have sold over 3.5 million copies to date. After having spent most of his life in Burla, a very small town in western Odisha, Ravinder is currently based in New Delhi. He has an MBA from the Indian School of Business. His eight-year-long IT career started with Infosys and ended with Microsoft, where he worked as a senior programme manager before deciding to pursue writing full-time. Ravinder has also founded and runs a publishing venture called Black Ink (www.BlackInkBooks.in), where he publishes and mentors debut authors.

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