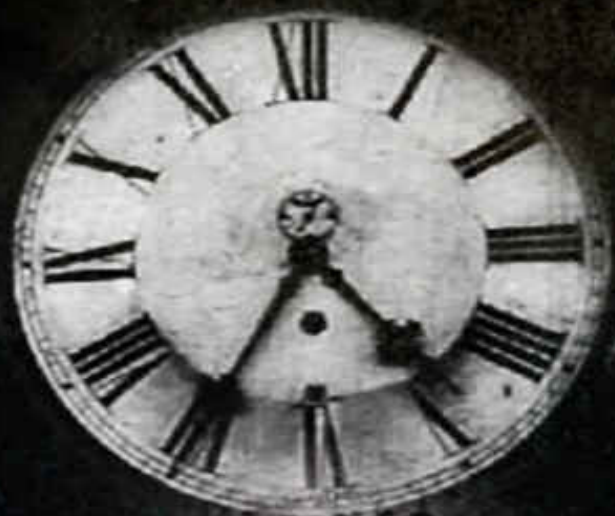


MURDER IN A

MINUTE



— LUST.DECEPTION.GREED —

SHOUVIK BHATTACHARYA

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Shouvik is a management graduate from S.P Jain, Mumbai and is currently working for General Electric in their esteemed leadership program. During the day, he designs high-end analytical software which makes aircrafts fly, and during the night he plots devious murder mysteries. Recently, he won the all-India Deloitte Be the One - story writing competition. He was also crowned as the best presenter in a national competition conducted by KPMG. He had brief stints studying in Carnegie Mellon University, Indiana University and European School of Business. He loves playing table tennis and has represented his state in competitions. He is a die-hard fan of Manchester United and you might spot him reading, in a café or a bookstore in Bangalore.

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Fiction / Mystery

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All the characters in this story are fictional. But, the situation they find themselves in, it could happen to anybody.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[The cry of Terror](#)

[Caterpillar learns to Fly](#)

[An uninvited Visitor](#)

[A trapped Butterfly](#)

[Faceless and Charged](#)

[The sizzling Storyteller](#)

[An unnecessary Lie?](#)

[The pool of Tears](#)

[The Charming Accountant](#)

[Running Away?](#)

[Bargain for Logic](#)

[The blood in my Veins](#)

[A close Call](#)

[Stop at Nothing](#)

[The tired Romeo](#)

[The angry Industrialist](#)

[Speak one's Mind](#)

[Obstruction of Justice](#)

[Confessions of a gentle Soul](#)

[No way Out](#)

[Meeting on the Porch](#)

[The entire Truth](#)

[The master Mind](#)

[The thin red Line](#)

[Living in borrowed Time](#)

Prologue

There are times when you just don't want to think about something, yet that is all you manage to keep thinking about. The uncertain phase of life where the heart tunes up with something you could never get, and yet every ounce of you wants to hum the unsung melody. Esha tried to fight it all - resist herself from drowning in the flood of emotions, but before she could realize, her thoughts spiraled into an endless maze of how life could have been *if only...*

You think you can outrun yourself? No... you cannot...

The familiar voice seemed to fill her head, shrill and angry.

You have got to accept it... the sooner the better...

Images flashed in front of her eyes... frozen moments lost in the testing sands of time.

She remembered the exact day, hiding behind the *Peepal* tree, she felt what she had never felt before. The tides of circumstance were too high and there was no way she could have sailed through. So, she let it slide... She convinced herself that feelings were just like the clouds - they never stayed at a point. Yet, this particular feeling had crawled back into her life.

The *Peepal* tree was still standing outside her window.

Grey clouds lined up in the western sky and disappeared behind the snow-capped Himalayas. Esha glanced up - A skein of swans flew in a V-shaped formation, looking down at the Arora Mansion and the field adjacent to it. The voices and laughter of little girls returning from school filled the room. Small boys, dressed in white and blue had occupied the field, kicking a football in every possible direction. There was no plan or strategy in their game, but it certainly wasn't bereft of fun.

Esha finished her tea and turned. The slanting orange sunlight illuminated her tired face, but suddenly her eyes fell on something and she froze. The room started feeling very empty... very silent. Only her eyes remained alert. The truth was staring right at her.

It was the blue envelope.

In the afternoon, while she was addressing the members of the board, the private detective had given her the envelope. It had all the answers she was looking for. She ambled towards it cautiously, her nose wrinkled as if she was walking towards a ticking time bomb.

Just then, she heard a knock on the door and turned instinctively. There was sweat on her forehead as she stared blankly at the door. Startled and slightly terrified, she walked towards the door. The envelope had to wait.

Her face reddened as soon as she opened the door. With an angry hand gesture and smirk, she beckoned her guest inside. No one spoke, but her eyes were glowing with rage.

'I have told him already,' Esha said defiantly, slamming her fist on the wooden table. 'What more can I do to satisfy you?'

There was no answer.

She stared angrily but her expression softened after a short while as her rage gave way to the feeling of helplessness. 'What more do you want me to do? I know, I have been stupid...' she asked pleadingly, her lips trembling like leaves on a warm summer night. 'For once, can you not believe me?'

Silence ensued. A bell at the nearby temple rang rhythmically.

Their eyes were locked again... It was a long moment, magnified by the silence... The distance between them became lesser and lesser and then suddenly, she could sense a pair of hands on her hip pulling her close. Overwhelmed with emotion, she resisted... but it lasted momentarily. Soon, she succumbed to the pangs of desire.

Both gasped...wanting nothing but each other.

An icy finger rose beneath her clothes. She trembled involuntarily, sucking dry air through her mouth. Her sweater was passionately removed from her body as she vainly covered herself with her arms. Staring right into the eyes suddenly seemed impossible.

She whimpered, her body responding to the anticipation. Her cheeks burned as the finger traced her lips, her neck and inched slowly towards her chest. She could sense it, but could do nothing to stop it. The smouldering eyes of her partner were calling her. All her senses were alive, invigorating her... all her sexual fears and frustrations disappeared, and she looked cunningly at the lips of her silent lover. Their lips touched; it was impulsive, a longing kiss full of sensuality and passion. Time seemed to move slowly as they held each other tightly with more intent. She felt weightless in the embrace, as if she was floating in a bright, blue ocean. She had finally found her peace.

Minutes later, Esha felt a sharp blow on the back of her head. There was a moment of excruciating pain as she fell forward... unable to stop herself. With a cloud of darkness enveloping her, she clawed at the floor... trying to crawl away to safety. Powerful hands rolled her around... a pillow was thrown on her face, and she felt a heavy force pressing down on it. She gasped for air, but soon gave herself to the awaiting darkness...

The cry of Terror

I

It was 5.30PM. Darkness descended over Palampur, the green hill station in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. It was eerily quiet. Crickets, which chirped ubiquitously from the darkness of the countryside seemed to be out on a holiday. There was no wind. A few birds fluttered ominously on the tree tops as they prepared themselves for a chilly winter night. Every now and then, the muted sparks of lightning threatened about the impending rain. It was so calm, one could hear his own breath – a reminder that you were indeed, alive.

After their customary evening jog, the two brothers, Rishabh and Arya were resting on the porch outside their single-storeyed, ranch styled Arora Mansion. The mansion was huge. It had a long, low roofline; its orange slates were in perfect contrast to the pristine white of its walls. The street lights shone through the branches of the trees and formed steady leaf patterns behind them.

The brothers looked different from each other. Rishabh, the elder of the two, stood six feet two inches tall, boasted an undercut hairstyle with the hair near the ears trimmed, while the hair on the top remained long and silky. His tapering beard was of the exact length as the fade above his ears. Every part of this grey-eyed man was well defined – strong arms, a slender torso, and a straight, thin nose. Arya was completely the opposite – he was a good five inches shorter than his brother. He had chubby cheeks, flabby belly, and sloping shoulders. He had a fairer skin tone, and his long and curly unkempt hair fell over his eyes.

‘Err... Rishabh...’ Arya cleared his throat nervously. ‘I mean... Why would you say that fast bowling is not in our

DNA? There is Kapil Dev, Javagal Srinath...'

'Fine!' replied Rishabh sharply, drowning Arya's voice. 'But can you really call the current ones, *fast bowlers*? Have you even seen their bowling figures? On the bouncy pitches of Australia their numbers are so damning that had they been economic indicators, the government would have called for an emergency.'

What had started out as a discussion about Indian fast bowlers had rapidly changed into a debate. As always, none of the points made by Arya were considered. Even on occasions that lacked significance, Rishabh did not like to lose.

The brothers entered the house and quietly lumbered towards their respective rooms.

Their housemaid Meera sprawled on the sofa in front of the television. The orange juice she was drinking dribbled down on her shawl. She took a handful of rice puff and thrust it into her mouth, then chewed it like a toothless baby while her eyes remained glued to the television set.

Out of nowhere, a bloodcurdling shriek zoomed through the room like a bullet. A tray fell on the ground. The sound of breaking china echoed through the emptiness of the corridor.

The brothers wheeled around immediately.

There was a hollow, elongated wail; as if fear and grief were weaved into a single chord.

Jyoti twisted her way out of Esha's room and hurried down the corridor towards them. Her face was pale and contorted. Her wide eyes seemed to burst out from the sockets, as if she had just confronted a ghastly apparition. Meera stood frozen, unable to comprehend the reason for the horror in Jyoti's eyes.

Rishabh stared at Jyoti, his heart twanging like a rubber band. The half-breathed words Jyoti uttered shook him to the core.

'Esha madam', she said panting, 'she is not moving.'

There was another scream.

This time it was from Meera who collapsed on the sofa.

The brothers hurried towards Esha's room. They slammed the brakes in front of the door. *Good Lord*. Arya had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself from screaming.

It was the most unnerving thing they had ever seen. Esha's body lay motionless on the floor. There was a scary calmness on her face as she lay there, face-up - her lifeless, bloodshot eyes staring up blankly at the ceiling. A light green camisole barely covered her pale, lifeless body. Her black trousers were shining with the light coming from the street. There was a pool of blood next to her head. Everything else seemed to be in order. The huge glass windows were shut; the furniture were in place. The back door however was open.

A wave of nausea hit Arya. He collapsed as his knees buckled under him.

Rishabh stood there like a statue, gasping for breath. His legs were shaking like a broken leaf being carried away by a storm. But he swallowed, and manoeuvred himself around the broken cups and plates. Breathing heavily, he scanned the walls for a switch. Having switched the lights on, he moved towards the lifeless body, bent down and looked for a pulse. He couldn't find one. He glanced shiftily towards his brother.

'Arya, I-I have to call the Police.' Rishabh stammered. 'You stay here. Make sure no one enters the room... Arya, are you listening to me?'

Arya did not hear a word Rishabh was saying. He was in a different world, a world where logic and reality had collided. Just a few hours ago, this charismatic lady was spearheading a meeting with the board members of Arora Cements. And now... She lay there dead in a pool of her own blood. What had she done to have invited such a terrible fate?

Rishabh repeated the instructions once again, but this time he did not wait for a response. He ran to make that call. When he returned to the living room, he could see both the housemaids, Jyoti and Meera, sitting in a corner and crying. He could see his half-sister Rashmi slide down silently against the wall. Her brother Pranav kneeled to comfort her. Suddenly, everything around him started moving. Slowly, and in semi circles. Then his vision began to blur.

‘Please... I am feeling d-dizzy. Please ...’ Rishabh fell on the floor.

Six police officers were at the scene within half an hour. They took charge and asked everyone to wait in the living room. Pranav assisted the policemen in their work. There were panic-stricken faces all around. Jyoti, who sat on the floor in the corner of the room, was sobbing uncontrollably and Meera was trying her best to comfort her.

Rishabh had regained his consciousness. With his back against the glass entrance door, he looked straight ahead noticing nothing. Tears rolled down his eyes. He tried to focus, but his thoughts reeled back to her...

Esha Arora... His sister, mentor and a friend. The orphaned child whom his father had adopted, and had later handed off the ownership of the company to. The young director of Arora Cements was practically a celebrity. She had a degree in civil engineering from UPC in Barcelona and Master’s degree from Cornell. There were two things that made her special; the confidence with which she negotiated deals, and the amount of empathy she had for the workers. She spoke with authority and enthusiasm, quite oblivious to the admiration and envy of her star struck listeners. A year ago, she had pulled off an impossible deal - the acquisition of a rival’s plant in Solan. A picture of her in a loose white

shirt, black formal skirt and gold earrings was published in the leading newspapers of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana. From then on everywhere she went, heads had turned like sunflowers towards the sun.

Esha was fair, delicate-featured, youthful twenty-nine-year-old woman whose life's primary concern seemed to be Arora Cements. Tall and nimble, she could move faster than the teens on the badminton court. After a match, she would soak in the awe-struck looks of the teenagers in attendance and then treat them with chocolates and cold drinks. Few of them had a huge crush on Esha - her dimpled cheek, lean figure and glistening eyes warranted nothing less.

At a distance, tyres screeched loudly, and the spectators in the badminton court evaporated before Rishabh's eyes. There was a fast crunch of gravel as a figure rushed towards the entrance door. It was Inspector Rashid, the highest-ranking police officer in Palampur. He was a small man with a broad chest and muscular arms. His round face adorned full-rimmed black spectacles which added a degree of suaveness to his personality. He was in his early fifties and was more inclined to be lazy, but like all lazy people who excel in coming up with cunning shortcuts, the Inspector too was intelligent. His colleagues called him 'The Jackal' owing to his abilities to smell the criminals before chasing them down. But, he felt he was more like a patient fisherman who drops his line in the water and patiently waits until the naïve fish takes the bait.

Two officers escorted him to Esha's room.

The inspector's eyes traced the length of the victim's body. Then he circled the room and returned to the corpse and crouched down.

'Navpreet,' called the inspector tonelessly, 'what do we have here?' His eyes were now settled on the sub-inspector, a short, fair skinned, clean-shaven man with pencil thin moustache. What was striking about him was his enormous

potbelly. It seemed as if he spent the better half of his time eating delicacies rather than chasing criminals.

‘Sir, the victim is Esha Arora, the CEO of Arora Cements. Died of asphyxiation which was preceded by a severe blow to the head,’ said the sub-inspector in a well-rehearsed manner, pausing to allow the inspector examine the body. ‘The victim was last seen by the housemaid at 4.30PM. She was wearing a black sweater... We have not been able to locate it yet.’

The inspector glanced up in surprise. ‘What do you mean by not been able to locate?’

‘Sir, we looked everywhere in the room. It is not here,’ the sub-inspector shrugged.

The inspector stood up, still examining the surroundings. Meanwhile, the sub-inspector walked over to the back door. ‘Sir,’ he said abruptly, ‘this door was found open when the body was discovered. According to the residents, the backdoors are almost never used.’

The inspector was silent, his eyes still scanning the room. ‘Doesn’t seem to be burglary,’ he mumbled.

‘It doesn’t,’ the sub-inspector said flatly. ‘The victim opened the door...’

‘Herself,’ said the inspector, as if following the sub-inspector’s chain of thought. ‘But, that is only one of the possibilities, Navpreet.’

The sub-inspector looked confused. ‘Ahhh... what is the other possibility sir?’

‘Have you considered that probably the murderer is feeding us misinformation? Perhaps, the murderer walked in from one of these front doors, hit her on the head, and deliberately left the back door open to deceive us.’ He scratched his forehead absently. ‘The missing sweater however complicates things. We cannot rule out sexual assault... can we?’ He paused. ‘Do we have men outside?’

‘Yes sir,’ was the immediate reply.

Uncertain, the inspector walked towards the door and then looked outside. It was completely dark now. The boundary walls were high, and there was barbed wire on its top. He turned, his expression clouded. 'High probability of an *inside* job. So, let me sum up. We have a door which was found open and a sweater which has disappeared mysteriously.' He paused as if taking mental notes. 'Navpreet, once you are done here, take individual statements from all the residents regarding their movements during the day. Also, let me know when you find the sweater.'

He took a last glance at the corpse and left the room.

The inspector re-entered the living room completely unaware that the murderer was present right in front of him...

He took off his police cap to convey his commiserations. He absently stroked his dyed hair, which though was lesser than what he would have liked, was perfectly gelled, jet black and slicked backwards. Almost everyone looked sad, or that they were very good at pretending.

'I'm terribly sorry for your loss. A very elegant lady Miss Arora', said the inspector solemnly, nodding and reflecting about a previous meeting with Esha. 'This is a case of *murder*. The room seems to be untouched... Nothing is missing... The victim was found wearing a camisole and a black trouser. She has a severe bruise on her head. It is murder, alright. Ah! A terrible affair. Everything points out that the murderer got away, at least for the time being. I gather that she was last seen at 4.30 by the housemaid?'

'Yes,' Jyoti croaked from the corner.

'I see, ...'

'I saw her a little before five.' The inspector was interrupted by Anubhav. He was the manager of the Solan plant of Arora Cements, and if the local gossips were to be believed, he also had a thing for Esha. The inspector turned

towards him. The face apart from the clouded expression and the visible pain on it, seemed very familiar to him.

‘May I ask what she was wearing then?’

‘She was wearing a black sweater with the word Cornell written on the back,’ Anubhav said. ‘She studied at Cornell,’ he added nervously.

‘I think... I saw her last. I was with her till 5:10,’ Naina added boldly, exhibiting an exciting length of her alabaster-white legs. She worked as an accountant in Arora Cements.

The inspector turned towards the young woman. ‘I see. Was she wearing the sweater then?’

‘Yes, she was,’ she said huskily.

‘Paaah,’ the inspector mused. He made an irritating noise, a kind of which one would expect a six-year-old girl to make before stomping her foot. ‘And, who called in the Police?’

‘It was me, inspector’, Rishabh said placidly, from the sofa.

‘Oh, was it you Rishabh?’

The inspector’s son and Rishabh were once in the same class. Rishabh was a perennial class topper and parents tend to remember these people indefinitely. The inspector walked towards Rishabh, and made himself comfortable on the perch of the wooden centre table.

All the eyes turned towards them.

‘Has the body been moved at all?’ the inspector asked sharply, the odour of stale cigarettes billowed at Rishabh.

‘Beyond making sure that she was indeed dead, I have not disturbed the body. Arya was vigilant throughout’, Rishabh looked towards Arya to which he nodded agreeably.

‘So apparently, we have a missing black sweater,’ remarked the inspector thoughtfully and stood up. ‘Has anyone seen it or taken it mistakenly?’

There was a rapid exchange of glances, but there was no reply.

‘Paaah,’ the inspector mused. This time the sound was more irritating than its previous rendition. ‘Very odd that. No problem. We will look for it. For the time being, I will ask you all to remain seated here. My men will carry on with the primary investigation. They will approach you for your fingerprints in some time. Sub-inspector Navpreet is inside, he will take individual statements from each one of you - Kindly co-operate. Meanwhile, I will have a little chat with Rishabh and Arya’, he then turned towards Rishabh and added soothingly, ‘my dear, would you accompany me to your room?’

The inspector relayed some information to a police officer and followed Rishabh to his room.

The room seemed presidential. Dark panels, teakwood furniture, glass mural paintings adorned the walls and beautiful glass sculptures were placed on wooden stands at each corner of the room. The brothers occupied seats around a small table which had a variety of business magazines and newspapers on it. The inspector walked towards the glass window and pushed it open. It was dark outside. Adjacent to the window; was a table on which sat a desktop computer. Leaning against it, the inspector reached into his pocket for a packet of cigarettes. He blinked nervously trying to frame a question. What to say to two young men whose sister was lying dead in the other room? He gestured towards an exotic looking sculpture of a fish with blue, green and red lines spread across its transparent frame. ‘It’s beautiful. What is it?’

‘It is a Venetian glass sculpture from the islands of Murano,’ said Rishabh, his voice uneven. ‘I like glass sculptures and paintings. Esha brought this for me from Venice.’

‘This should be darn expensive,’ the inspector said, feeling a bit of sympathy for Rishabh who seemed to be hit badly by his sister’s demise and was trying hard to hold his emotions inside.

‘Actually not. It costs fifty dollars. Esha had...’ Rishabh felt a stab of grief when he said the name. He looked down and the next few words were barely a whisper. ‘Esha had purchased this from the glass making factory... that’s why it is cheap...’ Rishabh buried his face in a handkerchief.

For a moment, the inspector pondered whether his wife would like a showpiece like that. He blinked and nodded, forcing himself to think about more important things that needed attention.

‘Boys, I know it has been a terrible day for you two. But I need you to focus. Can you do that for me?’

Arya offered an uneasy nod.

‘What were you two doing before discovering the body?’

Arya put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. ‘W-We had gone for a jog... We were jogging... I mean Rishabh and I were jogging.’ Arya drew a deep breath trying to calm himself. ‘We do it every weekend... We jog on the cobblestone path around the house.’ Arya stammered trying his best to answer the question. ‘Today, we started at half past four. W-We completed ten rounds within half an hour. Rishabh went for an extra round as he usually does. I cooled off on the porch. When he returned, we talked about cricket. We re-entered the house at half past five. This is when we saw Jyoti. She was shouting and running down the corridor towards us. It was at this point... w-we went to Esha’s room.’

The Inspector gave a polite smile appreciating the effort. He popped the cigarette between his lips and snapped his lighter. He pulled out a notebook from his overcoat and scribbled something on it.

‘Did someone go in or come out of the house during this period?’ asked the inspector curiously.

Rishabh looked up. ‘Only Rashmi, our half-sister,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘It was four-thirty-five, and we had just started jogging. She was talking on her phone and shouting at someone. After our run, we saw her again while we were

resting on the porch. I guess it was around 5.05 then. From then on, she was right in front of us the whole time.'

The Inspector weighed the information. His parched lips curled around the cigarette, its tip glowing red. He scratched his head unable to recollect how Esha, Rashmi, Rishabh and Arya were related. He stroked his hair absently and said, 'I am a bit confused about the family tree. Wasn't your father married twice?'

The cold breeze coming in from the open window was troubling Rishabh. Or it was the smoke, or maybe it was both. But, he did not complain, he simply cleared his throat and started - 'Yes, my father Vishal Arora had first married the renowned actress Archana Gulati. In the first four years of marriage, they did not have any kids so they adopted Esha from an orphanage. She was two months old then. Within a year of the adoption, they were blessed with twins - a boy and a girl - Pranav and Rashmi, who are presently seated outside. Three years after childbirth, Archana eloped with a certain retired Major. No one has heard from her since.'

Pranav and Rashmi were twins. When they were born, the doctor had announced, "Fraternal twins." Twins who were genetically unique. Even when they were small, they looked very different. Pranav, who was elder by eleven minutes was grumpy looking and fat while Rashmi was white and skinny. So, there wasn't any "which is which" moment for anyone around them.

The twins loved airplanes. Their rooms were full of toy airplanes. When they got bored of those, they would sit in the shade of the big *Peepal* tree and wait for a passing airplane. Most of the times, they would stay for hours without much luck. Rashmi would feel low. Seeing this, Pranav would pick some grass from his side and throw it on his sister. A fight ensued. A playful fight.

Esha watched them from her window.

One day Rashmi had disappeared before lunch. For hours, no one could locate her until Pranav found her at the base of a small hill near a brook. It was raining. Her light green t-shirt - drenched, looked a shade or two darker than usual. She wasn't the sobbing kind. Her face was rigid like a stone - Her tears were invisible in the rain, but Pranav knew. A question plagued her, "Why did *Maa* leave us?" Pranav held her and said, 'It doesn't matter now, I am here for you.' Hand in hand, they had returned home.

Esha watched them from her window.

No one held her hand.

Esha did not like aeroplanes, she liked trains. Like kids her age, Esha loved the window seat on the train. The ever-changing scenery, the musical rhythm of wheels turning relentlessly, and the sudden glimpse of the engine around a sharp turn appealed to her young and artistic mind. She was energetic and loved to climb up *Jamun* trees. She collected the reddish-black sweet-sour *Jamun* fruit and kept them in a pouch to savour it with salt later.

She would have gladly given up these little pleasures in exchange of Pranav and Rashmi's acceptance.

All her hopes of acceptance were shattered the day she had interrupted Pranav and Rashmi playing with dolls and action figures. '*Bhai*, I will also play,' Esha had said.

'Don't call me *Bhai*,' Pranav scoffed. 'I am not your brother.'

'Don't act like you are related to us,' added Rashmi irritably. 'Dad found you in a dustbin. Why don't you just go back there?'

Esha ran away, with tears in her eyes. She had a family, but still she was an orphan.

Presently, Rishabh cleared his throat once again. This time he was confident that the cigarette was causing this. He chose not to complain and continued in a monotonous fashion; 'Father then married Sunanda Rai, our mother and within a year I was born. Four years later, when Arya

arrived, she died in childbirth. That was nineteen years ago. Two years back our Dad passed away. He handed over the reins of Arora Cements to Esha.'

Inspector Rashid crushed the cigarette and threw it out of the window. It seemed as if the inspector's general sense of cleanliness and common decency had long been thrown out of some window as well. He closed the pane behind him and walked to the deep leather chair in front of Rishabh and Arya, and sank into it.

'Rishabh, you came back from the States last year and joined the company. Correct?'

Rishabh concurred with a nod.

'So I guess,' said the inspector slyly, leaning forward, 'you must know about the division of the estate, voting rights and that sort of things... don't you?'

Rishabh blinked anxiously at the inspector. He opened his mouth trying to say something, changed his mind, swallowed and then said, 'Yes. That's correct.' He knew what the inspector really wanted to know, but he just did not have the energy to defend anybody. 'The property is divided equally among all brothers and sisters. Since Esha was unmarried, her share now will be equally divided amongst us. Dad had appointed Esha as the CEO, so she sat at the top of the organisational hierarchy. She is followed by Pranav, Rashmi and then me. Arya will come into the picture when he turns twenty-one.'

The big wall clock in the living room chimed eight times.

The inspector gave a nervous smile. The leather chair squeaked as he stood up. He thrust the notebook in his pocket and marched towards the window, but then stopped midway and made a dramatic turn. 'Boys... I have a theory,' the inspector muttered, a scholarly look on his bearded face. 'When you contract a bad disease you ask for two opinions - one from the specialist the other from your family physician. Well, the trend is to give more value to the specialist's view. And why not? A specialist has more

knowledge about the disease. But you cannot possibly ignore the view of the family physician, because he knows more about *you*.'

The brothers exchanged a quick glance, unable to make sense of what the inspector meant, and he went on:

'I am the specialist here,' asserted the inspector assuredly. 'I have solved quite a few murder mysteries. I have a set method and a proven track record of putting the criminals behind the bars. But what I need is the family physician. Do you understand what I am trying to get at?

There was scepticism in Arya's voice as he said, 'I understand... in some way you are referring to us... But how will our opinion help *you*?'

The inspector heaved a sigh of impatience. 'I am a practical person, not the kind who imagines things or fancies them. I don't need your opinion.' He paused and smiled. 'All I ask of you two is to accompany me while I question the others. I want to make sure that everyone speaks honestly. Your presence should inhibit them from concocting cock and bull stories, because you are aware of what has been happening here. That is all I want. No opinions.' He smiled sarcastically and dropped heavily on the chair. He pulled out his notebook and wrote:

Pranav, step brother. Possible motive - Control of the company.

Behind the inspector, the door knob turned and the sub-inspector Navpreet pushed his large head through the gap. Having got permission from the inspector to come in, he presented his whole self. In many ways, the sub-inspector resembled "Bholu," the official mascot of the Indian Railways. The reason behind his roundness was overconsumption of beer. The sub-inspector alternated between cans of beer and a store of ambition, the drowsiness of alcohol intake and the fierce energy of methodical pursuit of mischief makers.

‘Sir, we have found the black sweater,’ he announced emphatically. ‘It was under the bed, in the guest room currently occupied by Mr. Anubhav Khurana.’

‘Yes... Anubhav Khurana,’ the inspector shouted as if it was the answer to the final question on *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. ‘The name kept slipping from my mind. Thank you Navpreet. I will be out in a moment.’ Inspector Rashid smiled at the sub-inspector and then turned towards the brothers. ‘What... Wait a minute - Anubhav Khurana?’ His body turned like a spring. ‘Isn’t he the same guy, the newspapers associate their sister Esha with? The *lover* boy? Even today’s paper has an article about how this gentleman was involved in a fist fight at Bailey’s disc yesterday.’

The inspector scratched his head as if remembering something. An impish grin appeared on his face, as he yelled, ‘SURPRISE... SURPRISE... Do you know who else was present in Bailey’s disc yesterday?’ He couldn’t control his smile anymore. It was as if as the cat had just discovered where the mouse hole was. ‘ESHA... Anubhav had a fight with *Esha* yesterday.’

The sub-inspector ran his fingers over his thick moustache, absorbing all the information. Meanwhile, the inspector almost whispered the next words as if trying to run some other calculations in his mind.

‘Rishabh, what was Mr. Anubhav doing here?’

‘He was here for the board meeting.’

‘Board meeting?’ The inspector looked surprised.

‘Yes.’ Rishabh nodded. ‘The members of the board of Arora Cements met here today in the afternoon. For the last few months, we were having a debate regarding the potential takeover by JK Associates, our local rivals. Last week we had a voting and those in favour of the merger were more. The amount was being negotiated. Esha had invited Mr. Dhruv Jaiswal, the youngest son of Laxman Jaiswal and owner of JK Cements, because she wanted to discuss the impact of a potential takeover and what

opportunities he would offer the current board members in his organisation. Mr. Anubhav is a member of the board, and he drives our business in Solan. He arrived in the afternoon yesterday and was provided accommodation here. Mr. Dhruv arrived in the evening and was provided accommodation as well.'

'That's it?' the inspector asked, his voice live with curiosity. 'No one else?'

'Well, five other board members had also come for the board meeting today. But they are locals and they went home after the meeting. Naina arrived in the morning today. She is an accountant. She has also been put up at the house.'

'Strange!' the inspector's face twitched as if he had eaten a bad fruit. 'Wait...Let me see if I have got all of it. Apart from Esha, the orphaned child, there were nine other people present here today... Pranav and Rashmi; the twins from your father's first marriage who are younger to Esha. We have you two, Esha's stepbrothers, sons from the second marriage and the youngest members of the family. There is Meera and Jyoti, the two housemaids. We have Mr. Dhruv, the industrialist who was here for the board meeting and Naina, who is an accountant. And finally, we have Mr. Anubhav -,' the inspector pronounced the name dramatically, 'in whose room we have just found Esha's sweater.'

The inspector looked over his shoulder towards the sub-inspector. 'I think we might just be getting onto something, Navpreet,' he said cunningly.

The familiar impish grin returned on the inspector's face as he remained completely unaware that the biggest clue he could possibly have was missing from Esha's room... The blue envelope...

Arora Mansion... The house of the most influential people in Palampur. And in this house... *now lurks a murderer.*

Caterpillar learns to Fly

II

When staring at the face of a tragic loss, one tends to look back upon life and understand what could have been done differently. The scars from the past start itching, reminding that it was all real. The tormented heart then harbors only one question - *Could I have prevented this?* Anubhav knew exactly what he should have done to prevent all this... Looking back, it all seemed like yesterday and not a decade ago.

In the spring of 2004, Anubhav reached Barcelona to study engineering in one of the most reputed institutes. A distant relative of his, who worked at the peer, had arranged a one room apartment for him at *Carrer de Balmes*, a kilometre away from the huge Roman Catholic Church - Sagrada Familia. There was nothing huge about Anubhav's room though; It had just enough space for a bed, a cupboard, a small study table and a wash basin. He would have loved to have a television and a refrigerator but his scholarship money didn't allow it.

The light blue colour of the walls added a certain aesthetic appeal to the otherwise congested room. Above the door, there was a huge poster of a girl sitting on a stack of hay, cupping her chin with her hand and gazing across the lush green field towards the horizon. On it ran a powerful quote, '*Todo estara bien al final. Si no esta bien, entonces no es el final*'. Everything will be fine in the end. If it is not fine, then it is not the end.

Anubhav gazed outside his window looking at the tapering pyramidal structures over the Sagrada Familia which glistened with the sparkling sunlight against the backdrop of bright blue, cloudless Andalusian sky. A

labyrinth of tourists flocked through the streets towards Barcelona's famed church. Though there was a lot of traffic, no one was using the horn. This came as a shock to Anubhav, who in India, had seen people honking incessantly standing at a red light, as if expecting the timed devices to switch colours in response to sound pollution. Some of them did not even stop at the red light - they pressed the accelerator instead of the brakes, as if blessed with immortality.

Anubhav turned and caught a glimpse of himself on the half-length mirror above the wash basin. His usually sharp, light-blue eyes looked hazy owing to the long and tiring journey. His eyes narrowed and he absently stroked his jet-black hair. As always, his hair did not need the services of a comb - It was silky and fell fashionably just by running fingers through it. Friends at home used to call him Tom Cruise, not without reason.

There was a letter on the bed.

Congratulations, you have been selected for the four-year Industrial Engineering course with us at Universitat Politecnica de Catalunya ...

First day of college is always hard. It is like coming to a new planet and it takes some time to adjust to the new atmosphere. Anubhav's first day was very eventful. The Registrar in the admin block refused to provide him with an identity card. Apparently, the scrawny kid in his passport sized photographs had no resemblance to the athletic build he possessed presently. After a brief tête-à-tête, he was provided with a temporary ID card, but by then it was already late for the class.

The *Escola Tècnica Superior d'Enginyeria Industrial de Barcelona* was a brown, ten-storeyed building with more than a dozen classrooms on every floor. It took him more time to locate the classroom than it had taken to pronounce the name of the engineering building. When he finally reached there, it was ten minutes too late.

The teacher, a bald man with an egg-shaped face was scribbling industriously on the blackboard. The students had their eyes on the board, their hands running like F1 cars. First day of college - the spirits were high. At that rate of taking notes, the notebooks wouldn't last ten days. But one would be surprised to see some of these students using the same notebook during their final year.

'May I come in, sir?' asked Anubhav courageously, his hair tousled and shirt unevenly tucked in.

The teacher's inexpressive face twitched instantly as if someone had just asked him for his kidney. With the poise of a Shakespearean actor, he dropped the chalk on the desk and approached the class. The spines straightened as class braced itself for a lecture.

Anubhav stood by the door, nervously biting his lip.

'Hard work beats talent when talent fails to... work hard,' the teacher scowled, as he began his well-rehearsed speech about the importance of discipline. 'And you know how to work hard? Well, you need to make a routine and then stick to it. Be punctual to it because if you don't ...' Numerous examples were thrown at the class - episodes from the life of the philosopher Plato to the Portuguese footballer Figo. Some students wrote this down too. Sadly, every class had a few!

Then with a snort of derision, the teacher gestured Anubhav to get in and returned to the board. Head down, Anubhav dragged himself to the last row of the class. Adjacent to him sat two Spanish girls. One, a short, buxom brunette and another a tall blonde with delicate cheekbones and deep hazel eyes.

'As I was saying before Mr. Whatever interrupted me,' the teacher continued in a monotonous tone, 'Ductility and Malleability are...'

During the break, the tall girl initiated a conversation with Anubhav. His embarrassment was short-lived.

'Hola. Soy Annette. Eres de aqui?'

For a moment, Anubhav appeared to be lost in the eyes of his classmate. The hazel eyes, creamy skin and flawless features could have stunned the real Tom Cruise. Her tight skirt complemented her slender figure. 'Sorry... I am sorry.' Anubhav said apologetically. '*Lo siento. No sé español.*'

The girl seemed a bit disappointed. But she tried again. 'Ah! *Hola*. My name Annette. You from around?' She offered a faint smile.

'*Mi nombre es Anubhav. Soy de la India.*' With the vigour of a five-year-old, Anubhav exhausted the entire list of Spanish words he had learned prior to arriving in Barcelona.

'So... you... new here?'

'*Si.*' Yes. Anubhav replied with a smile on his face.

'I am new here too. *Soy de Valencia*. First time Barcelona.' Annette gave a big smile, holding out her slender hand. Anubhav took it.

During the lunch hours in the cafeteria, Anubhav hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He had the wrong card... he went to the wrong counters... and finally decided that he wasn't quite hungry. The bald teacher from the morning class was gulping a mouthful of *risotto* and massaging his tummy. The chairs in front of him were empty. He chose to sit on the table next to him, where Annette welcomed him with a smile. She even offered him a part of her salad which although looked bad, Anubhav found hard to say no to.

Next day, Annette helped him with the cafeteria card and escorted him to the counter where students could redeem the student discount. She also convinced him to try shrimp *paella*, a Valencian rice delicacy which Anubhav swallowed with the same amount vigour as the bald teacher sitting on the next table. Annette did most of the talking. She told him about her father who played in the under-nineteen team for Valencia Football Club but had to drop out after an injury. Her English wasn't that good but Anubhav appreciated her candour.

In the evening, they wandered around the streets and then dined at Café Emma at *Carrer de Pau Claris*. It was an old-fashioned coffee shop – small circular tables with a couple of chairs around it. The lights were dim and the air smelled of coffee and pastries.

Annette had a lot to talk about. It was mostly about Valencia, about its football club, its beaches Costa Blanca and Malvarosa and the famous Fallas festival – a weeklong fiesta, which according to her was all about firecrackers, booze and women dressing exuberantly.

‘At midnight,’ she said excitedly, ‘the *ninots* – the thirty feet tall models, stuffed with fireworks, would be set on fire... it is crazy... loud... it is like a street party...’ She threw her hands here and there barely able to control her excitement. ‘You got to be there... the noise, the rush.... God... I cannot explain the feeling.’

Anubhav stared blankly at Annette, captivated by her infectious enthusiasm.

After the meal, they went for a leisurely stroll on the clean, well-lit footpaths of Barcelona. ‘I am a very simple girl,’ she smiled heartily. ‘Tight dresses, fancy parties... No sir, I don’t want those. A cosy couch, few good books, my sweetheart’s arms around me – that’s all I want. And, maybe some chocolate brownie... and... and... I will also like to go on a trip from Barcelona to Rome... of course on my personal yacht... and... uh... uh... uh... a private date with Ryan Gosling at the Eiffel restaurant. That’s all. And maybe a million Euros. That’s it.’

They exchanged serious glances and then broke into a fit of laughter.

The list of desires was exchanged for a while. When they had exhausted it all they decided to walk silently. Annette looked straight ahead, tiny lines forming on her forehead. Anubhav glanced sideways and noticed, as if slow motion, her fanning eyelids drop and then rise, exposing her twinkling, greenish brown eyes.

‘You know what, Anne? Smiling faces don’t interest me,’ said Anubhav earnestly. ‘But, a face lost in thought,’ he thumped his chest twice and added, ‘it gets my heart racing.’

Annette looked away, blushing to the roots of her hair.

Around midnight, Annette called for a cab. Before getting in, she planted a faint kiss on the cheeks of her patient listener. It was the same routine for the next few days. Instead of Café Emma, it was Fonda Espanya and Gabriel’s Tapas restaurant. Only aspect that changed was the duration of the kiss.

During the weekend, they visited *Font Magica de Montjuic*, also known as Magic Fountain. They had to walk for over a mile on the *Av del Parallel* to reach there. Hand in hand, they squeezed through the dense crowd of visitors and sat on the railing surrounding the huge fountain, ready to witness the spectacle.

Shifting colours located at the base of the fountain illuminated the moving water jets. The colours changed from red to blue, green to yellow in sync with the beats of music. For a moment, the stream of water subsided... and then suddenly spurt out high in the air dressed in a different colour, in tandem with the fast beat of a different song. It rose and it fell, as if a supernatural power controlled its movements. It was truly, *magic*.

Couples kissed with the fountain in the background.

Chilled beer was available at a premium. Annette thought - if not here then where... She bought two bottles and passed one to Anubhav, who never had alcohol before but acquiesced readily. The bitter liquid was difficult to swallow but he tried to keep up with her. Annette bought two more, but after seeing Anubhav’s struggles with the stimulating fluid, she drained both the bottles down her throat.

There’s a strange thing about alcohol, sometimes we drink when something bad has happened and we want to

suppress the feelings. Sometimes we drink when something good happens and we want to celebrate. Other times we just drink, and for no particular reason, things begin to happen.

The evening sped by in a trance of alcohol.

With her head slightly tilted, Annette noticed the water stream disappear. Apart from the muted sighs from the crowd, there was total silence. Annette blinked, her thoughts swerving in the randomness of her mind. Then with a sudden boom, out of nowhere, a massive stream broke out of hiding in the form of a flame... and then disappeared. Whoosh.... Gone. Then the same thing happened again. The gap between the successive rise and fall got smaller and smaller – the water rose higher and higher. Annette's heartbeats copied this movement – it swept her heart clean of all her inhibitions and left it with nothing but unobstructed joy.

She rested her head on Anubhav's shoulder and looked up towards him. In the next moment, their eyes were locked. The water jets in front of them rose skywards. The tempo of the associated music increased significantly. Annette moved closer, their bodies touching each other.

'Would you like to *kiss* me?' She purred.

Anubhav could hear her breathe. His ears were getting warmer.

'Only a madman will say no'. Anubhav replied, feeling a tingle of excitement flow through his body. He leaned into her and their lips touched. Within moments it gathered pace. Annette's hands were on his thighs, stroking it gently. He allowed his hands to slide across her midriffs. A knot formed in his stomach.

Annette suddenly broke herself away. 'I am thirsty...' she pouted. 'Would you like some beer?'

'Beer,' said Anubhav heavily, his eyes partially closed. He looked over his shoulders, trying to spot the person selling alcohol. 'I don't see him...'

‘There’s beer in my refrigerator,’ said Annette mischievously.

‘WHAT...’ exclaimed Anubhav, suitably shocked - his eyes wide open.

Moments later they were hurrying down *Carrer de Mexic* towards *Carrer de Tarragona*. They took the metro from Tarragona. The knot in his stomach seemed to tighten and he felt hollow inside. Annette clung to his muscular frame. No words were exchanged during the journey. Just the heart boiled with anticipation.

Within thirty minutes Anubhav was sitting in Annette’s apartment. The arrangement was similar to his room but was considerably bigger in size. There was an attached bathroom too. She excused herself and promised to return within five minutes. She reappeared within a minute slightly undressed. With hands on her chest, she took something from her cupboard, threw a flying kiss towards Anubhav and disappeared again. Anubhav helped himself to some water. The knot in the stomach was making its effects felt on his chest. He took in a deep breath. *Today is the day*, he thought happily.

The lights went out.

Yellowish-orange street light entered the room through the open window.

Annette entered the room wearing a full-sleeved black negligee. Her flowing long hair covered parts of her body left visible by her transparent clothing. She had a beautiful figure, full round breasts, a narrow waist and tapering legs. Before Anubhav could realize, she was on top of him. She unbuttoned his shirt - a hard body, few hairs on his chest and a great display of muscles.

She sighed and bent down, her bosom tracing the length of his body. He gently ran his hand on her smooth body, her lips within inches of his. Outside a car sped by, followed by a bike. Her hot breath was burning a hole in Anubhav’s face.

He allowed his hands to slide towards her chest – but, she pulled herself up.

‘Are you ready...’ she teased, her smoky voice sensuous.

She pulled the ribbon around her waist. The satin cloth slipped exposing her tanned cleavage. Then with a jerk, she let the entire cloth slip down her shoulder, which fell like a towel falling from the body of a sensuous blonde in a Hollywood movie.

A pair of small hoofed earrings and a fruity perfume was all she had on her.

Anubhav looked at her firm body. Bouncy breasts, the slender waist and the long silky legs glistened in the limited light.

Anubhav brushed his hair absently, the stretch making the cuts on his athletic body look more prominent. He clenched his teeth and drew a long breath through his mouth. It made a shrill whistling sound. Annette could feel her nipples stand in attention... in one quick movement, Anubhav turned her over... ‘Let’s see what you have got,’ he whispered sensuously.

That night Annette felt thirsty a whole lot of times.

Two weeks after their night of unrestrained passion, the duo went for a weekend trip to the Catalan sacred mountain - *Montserrat*. In the morning, they trekked to the monastery and soaked in the calmness of the surroundings. They heard the Basilica choir boys sing lilting choral music.

In the afternoon, they escaped to a meadow covered with knee-high grass. Annette ran across the grass covered field; the long strands of the bright green grass tickled her palms as she pushed through them. She did not know why, but whenever Anubhav tried to hold her, she moved away. She was too frightened to look straight into his eyes.

Anubhav did not mind. He had a feeling that somehow the resistance would make the union more exciting.

The sun was bright and the autumn wind gentle. The huge mountain stood silently behind them. The birds were whistling their happy tune. After a brief chase Anubhav finally caught her. He swooped her up in his arms. She looked up at the blue sky, her body feeling lighter than usual as though someone had pumped Helium gas inside her. Suddenly, everything seemed natural to her – she felt like she was staring at the ultimate reality and there was no point resisting it. It was the same feeling a sailor has when he sails through a wall of fog, and then his eyes catch the first glimpse of a bright island – a feeling of undebatable reality, something one feels when there is little too much wine in the blood.

Anubhav dropped her gently to the ground, the shining tall grass covered their bodies as they lay on the motionless earth. The small patches of clouds cutting across the sky made them feel more hidden. A lonely tree on the top of the mountain caught the slanting sunlight. They looked at each other and Anubhav pressed on her with a purposeful insistence... there was no need of consent... no need of permission. They made love right in the middle of the meadow.

Anubhav sipped water from a bottle.

Annette still dazed from the act of exhaustion, put her arms around him and whispered in his ears, '*Senza di te la mia vita non ha senso.*' She kissed him on his cheeks.

'I don't know Spanish, sweetie.'

'It is Italian, my *love*. It means, without you, my life has no meaning.'

They made love again...

Five days later, Anubhav was having lunch in Annette's apartment.

She was staring gloomily outside the apartment window. '... I should have known... I should have...' she muttered under her breath.

'I am just saying,' said Anubhav earnestly, his eyes watery, 'things are going too fast... It is scary for me...'

Annette made a few indecipherable hand gestures and looked around shiftily. Her body shook slightly, bitterness evident on her face. When she turned towards Anubhav, he could feel the explosion of rage in her eyes.

'YOU THINK I AM A WHORE... DON'T YOU?' She roared, eyes riveted on Anubhav.

'Anne...' Anubhav reached for her hand. 'Calm down, Anne... All I am saying is that we should take a break and...'

She could see her love burning away in the fire of Anubhav's indifference. In the curling wisps of the smoke of heartbreak, she felt a part of her innocence leave her.

'You think I am whore who sleeps around...' She erupted, pulling her hand back. Tears rolled down her eyes. 'Get out... *hijo de puta*... Get out...Right now.'

When we look up towards the sky and see swollen clouds of different shapes, we sometimes see resemblance between the cloud and a rabbit, or a puppy or the shape of a heart. It is a type of make-believe game, almost like life, where we keep seeing things the way we want them to be. Annette had given Anubhav everything she could possibly give – her time, company, body and heart. She had seen a prince in him, but he was just a black shapeless cloud – nothing but a *monster*.

Anubhav could hear her scream as he went down the stairs.

By that evening Anubhav had embarked on a new journey... a journey of self-satisfaction, the preparations of which had begun two weeks ago. He was spotted kissing the short, buxom brunette from his class in front of a shark tank at L'Aquarium, near the beach... The metamorphosis was complete.

During the next three years, Anubhav dated half the girls in his class. With a brilliantly incisive mind and striking physical features, it was almost impossible to say no to that *seemingly* innocent face. He moved from girl to girl as if there was no hell. But things were going to change. All the tactics, he thought were fool-proof were going to fail.

He was about to meet Esha...

An uninvited Visitor

III

Arya wandered around his room for a while, and then collapsed on the sofa.

He reached for a glass of water - his eyes set on the framed photographs sitting inside the glass cabinet. He took a small sip watching the smiling face of a chubby toddler, gripping the little finger of a young girl dressed in her white and blue school uniform. Looking at the picture, it was difficult to tell who looked happier - Arya, who was taking his first steps or his teacher Esha. She had that look of a young girl who cannot control her happiness - and why not - finally someone had held her hand.

The glass clinked when Arya kept it back on the glass table in front of him. His stomach lurched. With every breath, a hollowness spread in his chest. Breathing heavily, he clasped his head.

There are two things that eat from the inside - termites and memories.

His temples were hurting, his eyes closed involuntarily and he thumped on the arm-rest irritably. Glimpses from the past started coming back to him - brief flashes. Himself as a small child eating chocolates which Esha had gotten him. The fat neighbour who had chased them across her garden for stealing guavas. The puppies they had adopted after their mother died. Esha pushing him around on a little bicycle. The rigorous lessons of English language; A for Apple, B for Ball...

The memories lived inside him, the black and white reflection of the wonderful past. In reality, the mirror had broken into million pieces.

The next few English lessons, Arya received from a private tutor. The teacher was rude and wasn't shy to use his scale. That wasn't the major thing he had to contend with. He was forced to re-jig his whole life because Esha had gone abroad for her education. She spent four years in Spain and another two in the United States. With his motherly sister gone, Arya had spent most of his time gazing outside his window... at the slanting sunlight slipping through the leaves of the Banyan tree... at the sparkling dewdrops trapped inside a spider's web... at the stray dogs who were all grown up.

The rustling leaves and twittering birds would transport him to another world. There he would find himself near a pond playing with kids his age. The agony inside would disappear as he visualized himself playing with these fictitious characters whom he had named - Milan, Shruti and Diksha. While the teacher in his school went on about nouns and pronouns, he found himself chasing his imaginary friends through the rice fields and then lunching with them on the railways tracks. In many ways, those windows were his escape route to the world in which his mind was free of the shackles of loneliness.

Arya graduated to Blyton, Hardy Boys, Dickens and others - still hoping for his sister's return. When that day finally arrived, he was quite shocked. This was no longer the same Esha. She was a completely changed woman.

Business was all that mattered to her. She seemed to be nurturing a burning desire to prove herself, and she toiled day and night to make the family business grow. She travelled the length and breadth of the country presenting proposals to raise money for a new plant. People at the office knew that she was a forceful woman - a woman of considerable mental strength who possessed abundant energy to accomplish what she set her heart on. Her father recognised this and handed over the company to her instead of passing it to Pranav, the natural heir. It was not

that Pranav lacked experience, she simply worked harder to prove that indeed her father had made the right choice. She was completely ruthless and was ready to sacrifice anything, which became evident when she acquired the competitor's plant at Solan.

Yet, when it came to the matters of the heart she was as fragile as a flower growing on a rock, vulnerable to both wind and rain. Arya had noticed many bright men trying to woo Esha, but no one could win her confidence. Arya never understood why? It was sad how little people knew about each other even after living under the same roof.

Arya felt, the answer perhaps lay in her childhood. She was an adopted child. When Pranav and Rashmi were born, Esha was hugely neglected by Anuradha, whom she called mother. She would stand by the door staring at Anuradha while she fed, bathed and kissed her children. Nothing hurts more than unreciprocated love, Arya thought. Perhaps it was the lack of reciprocation that scared her of commitment. She kept herself engrossed in annual reports, sales contracts and income tax files, unwilling to get disheartened again.

A knock on the door brought Arya back to the present. The world seemed blurry at first, and it took a few moments to regain a semblance of normality.

Rishabh walked inside. He had changed into warm clothes. Normally, this young man with big eyes, straight long nose, rounded chin and Greek God features made heads turn. Not today - the loss of his sister was evident in his grief-stricken face and shrunken frame. He sat down beside Arya and the leather squeaked as he shifted his weight on it.

The silence thereafter became unnerving. Rishabh could hear the slow intake of breath at regular intervals.

'You remember that one?' Rishabh ventured, pointing towards a collage inside the glass cabinet. 'She had taken us to the Shiva temple in Baijnath. Boy, was she a gutsy

girl! Meera lectured her for an hour – Don't you remember?' He put on a shrill, piercing voice like Meera. *'Have you totally lost it... taking two kids so far away from home... that too alone...'*

Arya drew a deep breath, leaning forward on the sofa. His hair fell over his eyes blocking his view.

Reminiscing the past had no effect on Arya, so Rishabh tried something else.

'Our lives can *never* be normal again,' said Rishabh thoughtfully, 'unless we figure out *who* did it. Surely there is no sleep for me today. To be honest, I am a bit scared to be under the same roof as a murderer.'

Arya exhaled heavily, and returned to his thoughts.

Rishabh could feel his teeth clench in rage. 'It is almost clear that one of the insiders did it. I have *got* to know the truth. I *have* to... I must.'

Arya did not argue with Rishabh. He was confident about Rishabh's intelligence; If he felt that the person who murdered Esha was someone among the ones present in the house – it could be relied upon.

Rishabh's loud voice was laced with irritation, as if a fire inside was fanned by the wind. 'Doesn't it bother you at all?'

Arya sprang up to his feet.

'Doesn't bother... Doesn't it bother me?' Arya said hurtfully. His face twitched, and his voice trembled as he spoke these words in the first burst of emotion. 'How could you even ask that, bro? Esha... she was more than a sister to me. You... You at least have some memory of our mother. For me... Esha was everything. I took my first steps holding her hand. She played with me... She taught me to read and write. And now she is dead. Murdered. And... you think it doesn't bother me? Wow...'

'I am sorry. I did not mean it that way,' Rishabh said ruefully, raising his hand as a sign of apology. He looked away, his feelings shifting from those of vengeance to debilitating grief.

‘Yes, I want to know who murdered her as well,’ Arya said impatiently. ‘Why wouldn’t I? The h-horrible person who did this... must n-not escape. I am sure inspector Rashid will solve this mystery.’ Arya clumsily walked towards the cabinet on which the picture frames were seated. He continued, calmer now, his eyes fixed on the pictures: ‘It is just that... I-I just don’t see... how my involvement helps anybody. Inspector Rashid wants us to be there while he interrogates everyone tomorrow. Just sit and listen... but two people... you don’t need two people for that... one person is enough. Bro... Don’t think that I don’t want to help... I-I do... I am just not in t-that state.’

Rishabh could not think of a good reply. His thoughts wandered. A multitude of images flashed in front of his eyes. In the minute of silence that followed, he visualized Esha running her fingers through his well-gelled hair after he had successfully presented his ‘new idea’ to the board members. It was her way of saying *well done*. She did that once last week as well because apparently, he was looking too smart to be in the office. Sometimes she shared her dreams with Rishabh – driving a Jeep in the Serengeti national park in Tanzania, having dinner with Hollywood actor Keanu Reeves, and to dance on the roof of a train like Shahrukh Khan did in the Bollywood thriller, Dil Se ... She just wanted to live and dream. Was she asking for too much?

Rishabh jerked and stood up, words jetting out his mouth in a rush. ‘This inspector.... I know him quite well Arya... His job is to investigate and that is all. If he gets some evidence - good, else he will move on to the next case. Do you think he will be suspended if he doesn’t catch the murderer? No... no at all. It wouldn’t affect him at all. He just wants to do his bit, and then go home - watch television with his wife, or maybe have a drink with his friends. He is not motivated to catch the bastard who killed our sister.’

A slight pause followed. 'But it is not so simple for us, now is it?' continued Rishabh stiffly. 'Our lives can never be normal again unless we find out *who* the murderer is.'

'What is it... I mean what do you want me to do?' Arya asked, pleadingly. 'I am not that sharp you know. God... I am not even sure whether I will pass all the subjects this year... if I know any better... my involvement will only slow things down...'

'Let me be clear,' said Rishabh tonelessly. 'I am not asking you to pick up cigarette buds, examine footprints or follow suspects covertly. That happens only in movies. And, I don't think high marks in English Literature would have helped you much either. A woman loved us very much and she has been murdered. I *cannot* sleep in peace until the murderer is behind bars. All I am asking is - let the inspector do his job, but let us be around and help him in any way we can.' He paused. 'Arya - I am not going to let this person escape. So, are you with *me* or not?' said Rishabh purposefully, his voice cracking towards the end. He turned around, as if trying to hide the tears that were rolling down his eyes.

'I am always with you...' breathed Arya softly. 'You are my brother...'

'That's all,' whispered Rishabh. 'That's all I want. Nothing more.'

The brothers hugged each other. 'I will see you outside,' said Rishabh softly, and left the room immediately. Perhaps he did not want his younger brother to see him crying.

'We are coming for you...' Arya muttered under his breath.

Arya could feel goosebumps on his chest and arms. It was probably the coldest night of the winter. With the idea to quickly change into something warmer, he lazily opened his shoes, pushed them beneath the sofa and went to wash his face. When he looked into the mirror, his own reflection

scared him. He closed his eyes and within seconds, a tempest of emotions engulfed him. A soft voice was whispering something from a distance. In the next instant, the voice was chillingly close. Clear. He opened his eyes.

Arya knew that once his brother set his mind on something – more often than not, he achieved it. Whatever Rishabh's plan was, he would have gone ahead with it, without involving Arya in it. The fact that his high IQ brother needed him made him feel a bit proud of himself. The sarcastic jab "*high marks in literature*" however hurt him slightly. Arya had chosen Arts as the subject of graduation, which had irked his brother terribly. No one in the family had ever opted for a course other than Engineering and Commerce. According to Rishabh, people who pursued a degree in Arts were either too lazy to apply their brains or did not have much to spare. Arya had been the subject of frequent potshots since then.

Just when Arya was looking for his dry slippers his eyes fell on something. At once, he was paralysed - his heart vibrating like the drum-skin struck by a stick; the pounding getting more and more rapid. Particles of sand, in shape of neat footprints, were shimmering in the bright white light. He reached for the wall gripping it to support his weight. *Has someone been in my room while I was out jogging?* Arya asked himself, rapidly checking out the possibilities inside his head.

Holding onto the wall, he moved towards the back door, trying hard not to step on the footprints in the narrow path leading to it. Near the door, he drew a short breath, and stood in the silence of his room asking himself – *Did someone come to my room while I was out jogging?* He extended his hand and felt the rusty latch of his back door. It was slightly out of place. Questions were hitting his mind like hailstones on a tin roof. *Why would someone come here?*



A trapped Butterfly

IV

Outside, the wind was gathering speed.

Anubhav leaned back on his chair, blinked several times, and then looked around in a puzzled manner. He gazed at his feet for a long moment. Slowly, he raised his face, and his eyes caught sight of the raindrops on the glass window; more slowly still, he looked up vaguely at the ceiling.

He shut his eyes tightly fighting the barrage of questions screaming through his mind. His head was hurting. He pressed his fingers against his temple, breathing heavily, trying to resist. But, how could he? Especially, after what Esha had told him yesterday...

In the background of white, the images from the past appeared vividly - Esha smiling, pulling her fringes behind her ear, gazing into his brooding eyes. He felt paralysed, unable to push them away. *Esha... Why Esha...? Why...?* There are times in our life, we meet people who seem to wear a scent of uninhibited attraction - the more you try to avoid, the more you are attracted towards them.

He jerked his head vigorously, left and right, denying the images to flow in. But, within moments, his thoughts transported him to *Los Tarantoas* in *Placa Reial*, Barcelona... the place where he had seen Esha for the first time.

It was the final year of engineering. Anubhav's friend Alvaro had invited him for a *Flamenco*. Anubhav wasn't interested in art forms. He had obliged with his presence not to support Alvaro who was the lead guitarist that day but to take a good look at the young Spanish tap dancer who studied at the University. Alvaro had promised him an introduction with her.

Spaniards are known for their passion and it was most evident in the rhythmic beats of the *Flamenco*. It combines highly expressive dancing uniquely characterized by its hand clapping, percussive footwork and intricate arm and body movements with Andalusian music in the background. The rhythmic feet-stomping coupled with sweeping arm movements is one of best theatrical representation of Spanish cultural richness.

The stage was set - forty chairs were arranged in a neat row and column arrangement in front of it. Sofa sets were lined on either side of those chairs and there was a bar behind it, directly opposite to the stage. There was a second floor - the gallery was also lined with sofas which provided an incredible view of the stage.

Anubhav and his friends occupied the chairs closer to the bar.

People were walking in. Anubhav was drawing something on a piece of paper when he looked up absently. That was the moment. A girl, dressed in a khaki shirt and dark-blue hot pants was looking for a seat. He moved left and right on his seat to catch a glimpse of her face. Flowing black hair, lean, long limbs, curves... a marvellous body... but he couldn't see her face.

And then she turned. The hall suddenly seemed to be less in oxygen. Her impeccable beauty stunned Anubhav - he blinked a couple of times to allow the beauty to seep in. She had a generous face that looked ready to smile. There wasn't a hint of makeup on her face, and yet it glistened like a sea devoid of waves on a bright sunny day. Her eyes were sharp with a tinge of hubris in them. It looked as if those eyes had seen everything from condemnation to suffering, and yet were unruffled, ready for a fresh challenge. Trailing her was a faint smell of Johnson's baby powder... Esha Arora...

'Ola *señor*. Is this seat taken?' Esha asked, pointing towards the empty aisle seat beside Anubhav. Her voice was

soft but clear as a small silver bell.

Anubhav kept staring...

'*Señor*, the seat?' Esha asked, hoping to revive her awestruck observer.

'Oh, y-yes... P-Please sit. I am Anubhav. H-Hello.' Her perfect eyelashes fanned over her bright eyes. Anubhav held the stare for a moment, forced to let go in the next. That had never happened before.

'Esha.' She smiled, a faint dimple forming on her left cheek. She sat down and said cunningly, 'I see you are quite an artist, Anubhav.'

'Excuse me?'

Esha pointed towards the pamphlet in Anubhav's hand. It was the pamphlet circulated by the promoters of the *Flamenco*. It had a nice picture of the group along with their names. On the other side was a close-up of the director, a man with a square jaw and long white unkempt hair. Over his picture, there was a nice little sketch of the male genitalia.

'It is not m-mine', Anubhav blushed, and slid the pamphlet under his seat.

'I am sure it isn't,' Esha sneered, and turned towards the stage.

It was an ordinary start, something Anubhav would have forgotten had it been anyone but Esha. She seemed like a perfect *next*.

The show started with a lady's melancholic voice; it soon transformed into a fast-explosive kind that stirred the blood in Anubhav's body. Together, with the beat of the drum box, lightning prick of chords on the guitar and the pounding of the stomping feet of women dressed gorgeously in red and black – it was a show that gave goosebumps.

Anubhav felt uneasy. He glanced to his right at frequent intervals hoping to start a conversation. She seemed engrossed in the dance, so Anubhav decided to scrutinize the awful way in which he had screwed up his first

impression - the uncharacteristic stammer and then the lewd drawing did not help him a bit. But he was hopeful. *All I need now is a brilliant opening line.* During the intermission, the lights were switched on and Anubhav was still looking for that elusive opening line. He decided to speak the first thing that came to his mind.

'The dancer is amazing, isn't she?' said Anubhav enthusiastically. *What's wrong with me today,* he cursed himself.

'The tall one, right? That's Selena,' There was a hint of excitement in her voice. 'She has been practicing since she was four. She is magnificent.'

'You know her?' Anubhav seemed genuinely surprised.

'Yes of course, she is my classmate.'

'You study at the University?' Anubhav asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

'Final year, Civil Engineering. UPC.'

'Wow!' Anubhav exclaimed, sensing an opportunity. 'So tell me this Esha. How come, for all these years my eyes never fell on a gorgeous girl like you?' Anubhav delivered this bit with confidence accumulated over the years chasing one girl after the other. On many occasions, he had used this simple line as an ice breaker, and the results had been beyond satisfactory. Normally, girls would smile sheepishly at his comment and then try to cover their happiness by changing the topic of conversation.

'Oh boy! I am flattered, sir. Boys from other departments don't visit our side too often, very few girls there. Very unfortunate bunch,' she replied sarcastically.

No... No... Anubhav concealed his disappointment beneath a shifty smile. Once again, he was forced to look for a good line.

The music started gathering tempo and the room was instantly charged with energy. The fierce beat of the heels on the floor coupled with the rise and fall of the singer's voice enamoured the audience. Selena was way better than

the other two dancers. Her agile body, graceful yet powerful gestures and facial expressions exuded a mixture of anguish, sorrow and passion. The *Flamenco* drew the crowd into the intense yet unknown story of lost love. The show ended with a standing ovation.

In the middle of the thunderous applause, the director came forward to introduce the performers.

What is this you are reading Esha?' asked Anubhav suddenly, gesturing towards a book on Esha's chair.

'This?' She turned and picked up a hardcover book. 'It's the history of Prague. I was there last week and the guide kept talking about Franz Kafka and the Velvet revolution and some other stuff. So, I thought I would give it a read.'

'You liked anything you saw there?'

Esha acted as if she had not heard the question. She rolled her eyes and replied after a few moments. 'I liked the Charles Bridge,' she said uninterestedly, pressing the book against her chest. 'The baroque statues and the incredible vistas up and down the river, it is incredible in the morning.'

'I must leave now,' said Anubhav urgently, taking cue from her tone. 'It was wonderful meeting you.' Anubhav smiled and left. He knew he had lost the conversational battle and there was use no pushing it further.

He did not meet Selena that day.

In the night, he thought about Esha. *She wouldn't be easy*, he thought. But he had a plan. *Very soon she would be mine.*

The gods were laughing.

The next morning Esha's roommate announced the arrival of a package. It was small but beautifully wrapped.

The card simply read, 'I think you will like it. Anubhav.'

Esha was no stranger to gifts. Ever since her arrival in Spain, she had received quite a few from relative strangers

who wanted to be lovers. Some she received from friends – they too had the same asking. Her eyes were often dazzled by earrings, brooches, necklaces or splendidly designed bottles of perfumes. Every single time it was returned to the sender with a thank you note. Some, not ready to give up, had fired the Cupid's artillery few more times without making any impression on the virtuous girl. The gifts were shiny and expensive - Esha would have rather preferred a bunch of lilies.

She opened the package, running the list of possibilities in her head. Ring... Pendant... Elder Wand... she smiled silently. Surprisingly, the gift wasn't anything she had expected. It was a beautiful hand crafted souvenir of the Charles Bridge, the historic bridge over the Vltava river in Prague. The vibrant colours along with a silver border made it a perfect, yet inexpensive gift. There was a price tag, *three euros*. She kept it.

The following day she found a note on her desk in the classroom. It read: 'You owe me a coffee. Nexus building at 3PM?.' Esha checked her time table immediately. No classes after 2:40. Anubhav had done his bit of research. She was slightly impressed.

Anubhav was seated in the corner of the open roof cafe when Esha reached. She went directly to the counter and ordered coffee. She swiped her college identity card, and tapped impatiently on the counter waiting for the coffee to arrive. All the while Anubhav was looking at her. She knew it – somehow women can always sense if someone is looking at her. She took the coffee, rushed towards the table and almost slammed the porcelain cup on the table.

'What do you want from me?' she asked furiously, unsure why she was so angry.

Anubhav did not reply. He smiled and took a sip.

You think you are very smart, right? Esha thought to herself; she bent and placed her hands on the table. 'Excuse me? Have you gone deaf? I asked you something.'

‘All I wanted is coffee,’ Anubhav took another sip, ‘and I must say, it’s great.’

The expression on her face didn’t change.

Though, I wouldn’t mind if you sit down,’ added Anubhav coolly. He stood up and pulled the chair behind her.

Esha stared intently, her mind scanning the reason of her anger. There were few seconds of indecision but eventually she sat down.

It will take two months to get her to bed, Anubhav blew over his hot coffee and smiled to himself.

It started out as awkward hi and hellos being exchanged by relative strangers meeting in hallways and cafeterias... But it was forcefully carried forward by Anubhav to intellectual discussions about earthquake engineering, application of nanotechnology in material engineering and the importance of wind engineering in building skyscrapers. Anubhav, presumably unaware of his enormous infatuation spent more time studying civil engineering than his own course. He did not feel anything different... why would he? Wooing a girl was a difficult job and he was ready to do the time considering the prize...a perfect 36B. Meanwhile, he remained oblivious to the fireworks his heart witnessed in Esha’s presence.

The excitement of discovery transformed into joyous laughter and mutual comfort. Initially, Anubhav reminded himself of the relationship targets he had set for himself. Two months became three and then four. Very soon it did not matter anymore. Her easy sense of humour and warmth had driven them away.

Esha was very simple – a quality Anubhav prized the most. Her high cheekbones, almond shaped eyes and impeccable figure made every girl envious. Yet, when a decent looking girl crossed them on the street, Anubhav remembered Esha pushing her shades up her hair and sighing, “Wow. I wish, I was that gorgeous.” She seemed

completely oblivious of her own beauty. Her naivety impressed him.

They did all the things a normal couple would do - go for long walks, have late night coffees and occasionally visit theatres and concerts. Anubhav even accompanied her to the shopping trips at *La Rambla*, the kilometre long, tree-lined, shopping street which led to the sea. On the beach, they spoke for hours and discovered secrets about each other they hadn't shared with anyone else. Esha spoke very little, but whenever she did Anubhav didn't utter a word. He simply gazed at her, and every time something twitched within him. He felt he could see beneath Esha's controlled exterior - he saw an exuberant child who loved to go to the beach, build a sandcastle or have a water balloon fight with her friends. She did all of these with Anubhav.

Anubhav felt he had a unique power - the power to make Esha happy. He felt the urge to exercise this power more, and most of the times he was successful. Sometimes, Anubhav would think of the girls he had dated previously... those were all about sensations, but this one was way different. As the famous saying goes, lust feels a lot like love until you are asked to make a sacrifice. Anubhav was ready to sacrifice anything to see Esha smile.

They were in a platonic relationship for six months. There were moments when they both felt the odd rush of warmth but then Esha would back away uneasily. If it would have been some other girl, Anubhav would have quietly extricated himself from the meaningless charade. But this time it was different. The entrepreneurial spirit of all men who had fought battles for their love echoed within him - *If it is valuable, it won't come easy.*

One weekend, Esha was away on a trip with her friends and Anubhav found himself with nothing to do. In the morning, he got out of his bed and walked around the room, thinking about her. He scanned through the pictures in the drawer - the two of them in front of the Colosseum in Rome,

standing in front of an armed guard in Berlin, riding a carriage in the rain through the Old Town in Vienna. In all those pictures, they were smiling and hugging, but sadly only one of them was in love.

His melancholic heart pushed him to pen down a few lines.

*The spring breeze
With coffee cups,
No words said
Only eyes catch-up,
On green fields
With trembling lips,
Our hearts collide
On the moist mud.*

It was as if God was playing a cruel joke on him. So many girls had confessed their love for him, but he did not care for any of them. Now, this one girl whom he loved more than life itself, did not think him worthy enough. It reminded him of the famous Spanish saying, *lo que se siembra, se recoge*. What you sow is what you will collect.

He told himself that love takes time. Does the elevator come any faster when one presses the button multiple time? Sometimes, you got to wait with a starving heart unsure whether it would really happen. He felt that someday, the full moon of belief will disentangle itself from the boughs and branches of the trees and rise high in the cloudless sky, driving away the shadows of uncertainty from Esha's heart. But when would that happen? He surely couldn't wait forever.

Then he took a major decision. The relationship had moved beyond friendship; he had never felt so strongly for any other girl. He was offering companionship to a girl... attending to her whims by undermining his own desires... and what was he getting in return... nothing. A man, he

thought should assert himself because if he doesn't, he risks being called a 'man without a spine'. *I must act.*

The next evening, they were holding hands walking through the *Nova Icária* Park. It was the middle of January; the wind was chilly - the bustle of the city was far behind them. They walked to the beach - the sun had disappeared and millions of stars filled the sky like glitter caught in a majestic net spread by the Gods. A blue glass building stood a few hundred metres ahead of them, its reflection sparkled on the calm sea.

The beach was completely deserted.

Staring deep into her eyes, Anubhav wondered how special Esha was - she was outrageously beautiful, adventurous and impulsive yet she was humble, delicate, sensitive and tender. A huge smile appeared on Esha's face, the kind she had only when she was with him. For a moment, he had forgotten all about his desire to act.

They could hear a faint screech of seagulls. The moonlight glistened over the sea water.

'So, what is this about?' Esha asked playfully. The slight wind made her hair sway. It was sensual, and still beyond every sensuality.

Anubhav didn't reply. He just swooped her up in his arms and spun her around. Seven rounds. It all happened so fast that she didn't get time to react. He carefully dropped Esha on her feet, and he himself fell on the sand. Within a second or two she fell on him. They broke into a laughter.

Anubhav could feel her breasts rub against his chest. *I must act.* At once, he stopped laughing, and looked intensely towards her like a tiger ready to pounce on some hapless cattle. In the next instant, he grabbed her torso, rolled her over and climbed on top of her. The tiny waves crashed against the shore making a gentle whistling sound. His fingers ran against her inner thighs, and moved upwards, tenderly brushing the side of her breasts and

finally resting on her cheek. Cupping her face, he leaned in and kissed her.

He was breathing heavily, and what had started out tenderly, gathered pace. He kissed her multiple times, on her temples, eyes, cheeks and the neck and then slowly descended towards her chest. He could feel her heart pounding. He grabbed the zipper of her jacket, and pulled it down revealing her cleavage. She felt a shiver and slightly twisted her body. His fingers sneaked under her striped-pink shirt and traversed in circles over her breast. It turned him on with a vengeance.

With his unwavering eyes fixed on hers, he thrust his hand inside her loose jeans. She moaned. He leaned in, trying to reach her lips. He felt like all his worries were melting away.

She pushed him away. 'Get off me...' She began to resist. 'Let me go.' She pulled herself up

'Stay away from me,' She screamed, rose to her feet and ran away.

Anubhav was stunned - he lay on the sand hoping she would return.

A day earlier, he wanted to be a man with a spine. The heart wasn't under consideration.

A tide of despair swept over his life. Every attempt to communicate with Esha failed. There was no one he could blame but himself. Everything was perfect, but he had wanted more. *Greed*. All he was left with were painful memories of Esha's voice, her laughter, her silly jokes, and her warmth. He spent sleepless night wondering how life might have been if he would have been more patient. *Would Esha ever forgive me?*

The placement season was around the corner. Anubhav immersed himself in text-books and mock-interview classes, still expecting to meet Esha in the libraries or in the trainings rooms. He couldn't spot her during the interviews as well. Anubhav got a job in a large French conglomerate

with its headquarters in the French city of Lille. Esha didn't sit for the interviews... Anubhav learnt from one of her friends that she had enrolled for post-graduation course in Cornell University.

There were no goodbyes.

The most important piece of a healthy relationship is communication. Talking and clearing things out when there is trouble. But Esha was gone. There were no conflicts to overcome, or any barriers to surmount; there was nothing that Anubhav could do. He left for Lille.

*No parting words,
No whispers made;
A wave of questions,
On a restless stretch;
A lot of tears,
In the falling rain;
With empty cups,
Our winters came.*

*Why did you do this to me...
Why did you do this to me...*

It takes strength to hold on to something you love... it takes more to let go.

Everything in our subconscious, the unprocessed emotions, the unfulfilled desires and the secrets buried so deep that with time we forget they even existed seek manifestation through us in our daily deeds. It bends our personality. The girls Anubhav dated in Lille, found that the hard way. All his romantic adventures ended with blood stains on the sheet. For Anubhav, somewhere deep within, love had come down to egotism and rejection had become a challenge. He felt it was romance that he was looking for,

but inside him, romance had been long replaced by the desire to overpower – make a woman submit to his maleness. It was the only thing that made him happy.

After sometime, even those adventures lost their charm.

All he wanted was to rewind the film and rewrite the script. In hindsight, it was so easy to spot the mistake, to see how greedy and impatient he had been...

It was a lonely, miserable time in Anubhav's life. He took extra assignments and worked more hours than he should have. He did his own shopping, cooked his own meals and visited the Laundromat once weekly. Work seemed too mundane, but he tried his best. Years moved on, and he was transferred to the Paris headquarters of the company. There he abused his manager in front of a roomful of customers and was suspended immediately.

It is said - The darkest hour of the night comes just before the dawn. While serving the last few days of his suspension, one morning, he received a small message on a social networking platform.

I am in Paris. Would you show me around? Esha.

Anubhav shut his eyes hard and opened again.

In some anxiety, he read and re-read every word, worrying whether it really meant what it meant. It was as if a long-term expectation coming true had robbed him of the opportunity to dream of the beautiful thing which he hoped would never come true. The action plan for what needs to be done next wasn't prepared... it never seemed necessary.

It had almost been three years... Had Esha finally forgiven her? But, how does it matter, even if she did? Things had changed for Anubhav - he made a mental note of the pros and cons of meeting the girl whom he considered responsible for his present state of crisis.

A caged bird doesn't fly away immediately when it finds the door open. It takes a few steps here and there just to soothe her unbelieving eyes that freedom is near, and then it spreads its wings and takes a leap. Anubhav, pushed the

conflicting emotions away and allowed the excitement drench his soul like the first summer drizzle.

Sure. When and where?

It took a minute for the reply to arrive.

7PM. Pont de l'Alma railway station.

Sure, I will be there. Anubhav replied.

Michael Simkins once said, "Paris is a place in which we can forget ourselves, reinvent and expunge the dead weight of the past." For the first time, the magic of Paris was working on Anubhav. There was something very different in its air. It had that indescribable stimulating and intoxicating effect that fills you with a strange longing for fun as if you have just consumed a bottle of champagne. Anubhav had already forgotten that for the past few months, he had held Esha responsible for the mess his life had been. The Parisian air made his heart believe in the recurring dream he always had, that one day Esha will be *his*.

Anubhav stood on the pavement outside the exit of the railway station. He looked down the streets. There was something romantic, yet mysterious about the well-lit streets of Paris, it brought a smile on his face. After years of hopelessness, he was finally waiting for the girl, about whom he had thought of every single day, for the last three years. The old poster from his apartment in Barcelona flashed in front of his eyes, '*Todo estara bien al final. Si no esta bien, entonces no es el final*'. Everything will be fine in the end. If it is not fine, then it is not the end. He smiled again.

Sometimes, hope is not the best thing - it makes you go the wrong way and you ruin the most important decision, whether to keep trying or to let go.

Emerging from the station, Esha brushed a lock of her jet-black hair from her temples and looked around. Her black, long-sleeved, one buttoned peplum hem jacket and her black skirt were in perfect contrast to her glossy red shirt. Her slim, perfectly waxed legs shone under the bright

streetlights as she slowly moved towards Anubhav with a faint smile on her face.

Right from the moment Anubhav had received Esha's message, he thought he would know what to say. Now, when she was a metre away from him, he fumbled for words. It was just like the time he had first met her. Everything that came to his mind seemed inappropriate for the moment. The quick shower, shave and perfume had made him look presentable, but they had no effect on his levels of anxiety. Somehow, he did not look like a man greeting a loved one after a long interval, he looked more like a man who had remembered her every day.

'You look... look stunning. How are you?' Anubhav stammered, while Esha wrapped her arms around him, her black boots added three inches making her almost as tall as Anubhav. He held her tightly, letting the years of separation between them melt under the lights of the most romantic city on earth. The hug lasted a little longer than he had anticipated.

'So,' Anubhav said still looking at her, appreciating her beauty. 'Would you like to go to the Eiffel tower.'

'Wouldn't it be crowded now?' she asked softly.

'Yeah, probably it will be.'

'What other options do we have?'

'Well, we can walk by the river, use the bridge at Pont Royal and go visit Louvre.'

'That sounds awesome,' said Esha excitedly. 'Let's do that. You must be having a great time here, Mr. Tom Cruise,' Esha teased him.

'Common, don't you start,' Anubhav mumbled.

'Am I embarrassing you, my little baby?' Esha sobbed playfully.

Paris was always known as the city of love. Couples, when they crossed the bridge over river Seine, would write their names on a padlock and latch it on the railings. They would hug and kiss each other profusely and then throw the

key in the river, thus immortalizing their love. Anubhav remembered the last time he had crossed such a bridge over Seine. He had wept there.

They walked by the river. Seine was calm. At wide intervals, a tourist cruise would spring by forming tiny ripples on it. There were shining streaks of yellow on it as the river reflected the lights from the street. People dressed in colourful running attires jogged with ipod's hooked onto their sleeves. It is said, running on the *Quai de Orsay* was one of the most unique experiences one can have. Well-lit cobblestoned streets, river Seine flowing by your side and the Eiffel tower, the majestic 324metre high iron tower twinkling in a variety of colours right in front of you - what more could a person want?

They headed towards the Louvre. The water lapped silently; two slender men went past them on their bicycle mumbling something in French; The lights of a tourist boat flickered at a distance; there was a slight breeze; Esha inhaled, it was like the air on a mountain. Thin, distinctive and refreshing.

Parisian air affected everyone in a different way. Suddenly, Esha started running... her arms outstretched and her head gazing towards the sky. Anubhav followed suit. After crossing a boat turned restaurant, she stopped and leaned against a railing overlooking the river. Anubhav stopped in front of her, hands on his knees, panting. Their eyes locked.

Esha broke her stare, manoeuvred herself over the railing, opened her shoes and sat there with her feet almost touching the river. Anubhav did the same, feeling the old vigour of chase bubbling inside him.

At a distance, the horn of a tourist boat blazed heavily.

Esha rested her head on Anubhav's shoulders, and just like that he felt something twitch deep inside him, something cold, yet his chest burned from its heat. He rested his cheeks on her head squishing her tidily arranged

hair. His eyes remained open. On the right, he could see the city, brightly illuminated by artistic street lights. Towards his right, the beacons atop the Eiffel tower lit up the Parisian sky red, green and blue. On the other side of the glistening river, was the brightly lit facade of *Grand Palais*. It was indeed the City of Lights.

The moon rose higher in the sky.

Esha told him about her time in Cornell University and then about her ancestral business at Palampur. Anubhav shared his experience in Lille. Both had things to hide, yet they regained the familiarity they once had.

Anubhav could feel the silkiness of her hair under his cheek. It smelled of jasmine. Esha took his hand in hers and closed her eyes. Anubhav felt his heart beat in the familiar fashion it did three years ago. Finally, he gave in and kissed her on the temple. But, the very next moment he felt blank.

It was the worst feeling one could have. For years, he was waiting for this moment and now when it was happening, he felt blank. The feeling of accomplishment of receiving what he had always hoped for and the feeling of hopelessness knowing it might just be an ephemeral event cancelled each other out. Blank. Not knowing what to do, he closed his eyes. The crisp Parisian breeze cleared his head.

'I have never loved anyone like I have loved you. You are so different. So, beautiful,' Anubhav thought to himself. Is it true? Will it really happen? Will she finally be *mine*?

A tourist ship was now approaching them and the river water began touching their bare feet. The water was cold, it made Esha shiver slightly. Anubhav put his arms around her. He was getting conscious of her breath, of the softness of her hands and the coldness of her feet. He wanted to say, Esha - I love you, I love you, I love you - in the same way, a million-other love-smitten men had pronounced their love in Paris. What else could he say, he pondered. I love you, the words echoed in his mind. There was nothing simpler yet more meaningful.

Thoughts recede but feelings do not. They just look for an opportunity, an odd spark. Anubhav pushed out the desire to whisper *I love you* in her ears. But the old feelings rushed in all at once. The feeling of awe, when from hundreds of voices in the cafeteria, his ears could filter Esha's. The feeling of disbelief when she held his hand for the first time. The feeling of joy when she shared her difficulties with him. The feeling of accomplishment when she prioritized him before everything else. The feeling of time stopping when he used to sit on the rusty benches in the garden near the mechanical engineering department, and look at her pass by. It had made him feel like a lonely man, left behind on a forsaken island looking at a ship that could save him, but passed by without even sparing him a glance.

An hour passed by without them uttering a word. It was getting colder and Esha's jacket, which was more about style than comfort, did not help. She folded up like a kitten and clung on to Anubhav. The noise of the cars and two wheelers seem to recede into the distance.

'Anubhav,' she said softly. Her voice rung like bells in an empty cathedral.

'Yes my dear.'

The conversation was brought to a steady halt by an incoming tourist cruise. The revving engine made hearing difficult. The sense of anticipation was building up within Anubhav as he felt his heart pounding. *Was this the moment? Would things finally be the way he always wanted them to be?*

'Anubhav, would you come with me to India? We have just acquired a new plant there. You will make a very good manager.'

Anubhav smiled. *Finally, it starts.*

'Anything for you. *Anything.*' He said it involuntarily but so obviously frank that he tried to talk to himself; *what did I just say. Do I really mean it?* He looked at her to understand

whether his feelings had reached her. Her expression resembled a look of weariness, as if her endurance was withering away. He didn't understand what it signified. He kept looking at her...

'Do you have feelings for me, Esha?'

She looked away and did not answer for a moment. Then she began slowly. 'I don't know. I am a very complicated person, Anubhav.'

The words hurt but, Anubhav was hopeful. She had come all the way to Paris to meet him and her tone clearly suggested she was giving it a thought. He took a deep breath and held it inside. He decided not to be greedy this time.

Their eyes locked. For a fleeting moment, a tiny wisp of time floating like a lotus in a pond, Anubhav saw love in Esha's eyes.

'Anubhav, I really like you but there are things....'

Esha couldn't complete the sentence. She just looked at him and he at her. Like many other stories, this too could have ended differently if that one sentence were completed.

The shrillness of Rashmi's voice shook Anubhav out of his reverie.

Anubhav could see the tall figure of Rashmi bearing over him. She was a slim woman and had a face that one would surely remember. Dark brown eyes, jet black hair and splendid glowing cheeks with a hint of redness in them. Inspector Rashid and the sub inspector who were conversing near the dinner table were also alarmed by this sudden scream. She seemed furious, and she continued to stare at Anubhav expecting an answer.

'Sorry?' Anubhav said worryingly.

There was a distant clap of thunder. 'Why did you murder Esha?' Rashmi barked, her firm voice made every head turn.

The tone of authority scared Anubhav and he couldn't understand why she assumed it so naturally. She looked like an attractive, young woman – only her eyes disturbed him; it was like welding torch cutting through the skin. The colour of Anubhav's face changed rapidly. It took him sometime to utter the next few words.

'What the hell are you saying Rashmi?' said Anubhav nervously. 'I...I didn't murder Esha.'

'Oh is that so? Did you or didn't you enter Esha's room through the back door after five? You were there for a minute. I saw everything. I saw you leave her room with that guilty expression on your face.'

Anubhav's voice trembled as he said something. It wasn't audible.

Sub-inspector Navpreet gave a winning glance to the inspector.

Faceless and Charged

Chapter V

Tiny drops of rain lashed against the windows. The high-pitched wail of the wind was audible at frequent intervals. The swollen clouds, still some distance away judging by the distant claps of thunder, were approaching at full speed.

It was inky black outside, but inside the living room everything looked bright... except it was not. Everyone present were seated at the edge of their seats waiting anxiously for their chance. The sub-inspector called everybody, one-by-one, to the dining-table and asked them about their movements during the evening. This went on for a while.

Waiting for your chance made it a nerve-wracking process. It accentuated an occasional sigh to an opera crescendo and was enough to startle the wits out of the unhappy gathering. A mixture of grief and panic was visible on the faces. Some were sitting perfectly still but had trouble breathing, some were feeling restless while others could feel a flutter in their stomachs.

Among them, a figure sat calmly, reciprocating the grief of others by a watery eye or a look of encouragement. It was all a ruse... a mask of pain deceiving the people around, making them think that this mind was capable of feeling sadness. That emotion had long gone... substituted by hate. For the last six months, this mind had only one thought... one purpose – the destruction of Esha Arora.

I can't stop now. There's more work to be done.

The rain started drumming heavily against the dark windows.

The sizzling Storyteller

Chapter VI

Inspector Rashid fought the unfamiliar sense of anxiety as he stood in his garden looking straight at the snow-capped mountains. The skies had cleared up after the rain last night, and the golden sunlight made everything it touched glisten. The trees stood majestically, flaunting their dark green leaves. The inspector didn't notice any of this - everything seemed blurry to him. He didn't hear the calls of the blue-winged Magpies which resonated across the valley nor the cool breeze that whispered soothingly as it swirled between the mountains. The only thing he heard was the voice of the District Magistrate - as if a cassette was being played again and again in his mind. *Rashid, we must make an arrest by tomorrow.*

On the other side of the fence, a lanky boy was milking the family cow. His mother, a young woman of thirty was shouting something about a man reaching the moon. Her ears, weighed down by a heavy earring, looked out of shape. Small children, dressed in white and blue were walking down the road. Everything seemed normal, except it wasn't. The inspector rubbed his hands and walked across the garden to the other side where a small *neem* tree grew conspicuously. He shook a branch and droplets of water trickled down his face. He inhaled the cool air and tried to empty his mind.

The inspector's wife was out in the garden too. She was attending to the shrubs which had felt the full force of the storm. The family dog was busy chasing imaginary objects along the length of the garden. Gone were those days, when owners named their dogs *Moti* or *Sheru*. With the advent of Hollywood in India, it was chic to call your dog Tommy,

Jimmy, Joey or Woody. This particular dog was called Bruno and his futile chase ended as soon as he saw the sub-inspector entering through the gate. With his tail wagging, Bruno sniffed him and paced around him in circles. The sub-inspector seemed pleased with the way the handsome labrador welcomed him. He bent down and patted Bruno on the head. Then he exchanged pleasantries with the inspector's wife, who in turn promised to fetch him some breakfast. She grabbed hold of Bruno and disappeared inside the cottage.

'Morning Navpreet, greeted the inspector loudly. 'It seems that the diet has been working for you.'

'Not just a diet, sir,' the sub-inspector laughed heartily, and patted his enormous belly. A balanced diet – a bottle of beer in each hand.'

In the eleven years, the inspector had known Navpreet, they had engaged in many a mindless banter. It was one of the pleasures of living in a small town, the incidents and amusements are less varied. One made fewer acquaintances, but since the town was small they met more often. The best thing about the people in smaller towns was that they never changed, they just grew older. Also, there was hardly an unfamiliar face; When you walk down a street, familiar smiles greet you from the open windows, kick-starting leisurely conversation on subjects ranging from cricket to politics and of course everyone's favourite - Bollywood. But today, there were more serious matters to attend to.

The sub-inspector frowned. 'Got to read the newspaper yet?'

'Yeah! One full page on the Arora case. Who leaked out so much information?'

'Maybe one of the officers or their wives. We will never know.'

'It could have been my wife too,' the inspector sighed and looked over his shoulders to check his wife's presence.

Inspector Rashid was quite weary of his wife. Mrs Rashid took full advantage of the fact that their house was separated from their neighbours by a fence and not a wall. She would spend hours, craning her neck over the fence for gossip. Then she would relay this information to a greedy ear on the different side of the fence. Moreover, she felt like a detective herself, specializing in solving (in some cases starting) post-marital affairs. She had a keen interest in the cases her husband worked on, and whatever he told her about it, became the common knowledge of the entire town within minutes. But she had a superpower - when the inspector refused to give her the details of a case, she could find out the intricacies of the case within a day, sitting placidly at home. She would then torment him with condescending remarks like - “you shouldn’t have allowed Ramesh to leave town” or “God, you are so naïve, how could you believe a hooker?”

Last night, the inspector had given her all the details of the case. There was a reason to it. In several cases, the inspector had benefitted from his wife’s secret team of maidservants, drivers, grocer, milkman, and shopkeepers. This being a high-profile case, the inspector was eager to get some insider information... that too as fast as possible. Thus, the article in the newspaper did not surprise him. It could have been her or any of her hundred accomplices.

Inspector Rashid’s son appeared carrying two plastic chairs. He placed it in front of them and hurried back to the cottage. The sub-inspector found it difficult to fit his wide and heavy frame on that small plastic chair which squeaked as he tried to adjust himself on it.

‘It’s got to be Anubhav,’ blurted the sub-inspector, his puffy red cheeks looking puffier than ever.

The inspector frowned. ‘Why would you say that?’

‘For one, he does not have an alibi,’ chimed the sub-inspector assertively. ‘Esha was last seen at around 5.10, everybody has an alibi for that time. Pranav was with Naina

and the brothers had seen Rashmi rambling outside. Jyoti was in the kitchen, and Mr. Dhruv was in his room. Meera would have seen them if they had gone towards Esha's room. Anubhav claims he was in his room too but he has no alibi.' He paused. 'Also, let us not forget the fight... probably a lover's spat - so there is the motive, alright. And...finally, there is the sweater,' the sub-inspector closed his argument with an air of confidence.

Inspector Rashid hesitated for a moment. 'I find it very extraordinary Navpreet. I mean... why would a person commit a murder and then take the victim's sweater and put it under his bed. There is no rhyme or reason to such an act.'

'People do strange things in the heat of the moment, sir.'

'Don't I know that already Navpreet...' said the inspector thoughtfully. He crossed his legs and took a deep breath. 'Twenty-six years... since I joined the police force - there is very little left for me to see. And one thing I have learnt - murder is an amateur's crime. Of course, I am talking about the regular cases, not serial killers or gangsters... Murderers - they are ordinary people like you and me... with just one difference - their common sense has been trumped by their desire for love, freedom, money or power. It is usually one of these. And suddenly, they see a shortcut, a shorter route which would release them from the suffering they were subject to, and they go for it.'

'While executing the shortcut, some of them fumble,' continued the inspector articulately. 'Why? Simple... they fumble because they are amateurs! Some are so overwhelmed by their success; they end up doing crazy things. Husband murders wife but wants to kiss her one last time allowing the servant to spot him. Son murders father, and instead of running away, he starts looking for his father's pen. Why? He wants to have a souvenir of the bad times. His sister walks in, and then he has no place to hide.

These actions cannot be explained, Navpreet,' said the inspector gloomily, casting an eye on the mountains.

The sub-inspector gave a stiff nod and carefully studied the inspector who seemed to be lost in contemplation.

'From what I have seen, murders are of two types,' said the inspector, the tips of his fingers coming together. 'First are the unplanned ones, committed by people who were suffocated in some way by the acts of the would-be victims. When they see an opportunity, their fear is eclipsed by the pain they have suffered and they *strike*.'

'Second are the planned ones, committed by schemers. They are ready to suffer a little more, but meanwhile they come up with a plan, accounting for every eventuality and leaving no provision for the unforeseen. Once they are confident about their foolproof plan, they would wait for the perfect opening and then *bam!*'

He paused and glanced at the sub-inspector. 'To me Navpreet,' said the inspector pensively, glancing over at the sub-inspector, 'this looks like the type two murder done by someone with a controlled intelligence. Nothing is random here... and that black sweater has got to be the key to this riddle. Believe me, when we discover the truth behind that sweater, we would have solved the case.' There was something indescribable about the way the inspector said those words. It was as if he was standing in front of a closed door, aware of the secret it guarded.

'But why would you think that way?' protested the sub-inspector defiantly. 'I know this is a high-profile case, and that the grim and strange facts lend it a character of its own. But every case does not require us to employ higher powers of observation and intricate analysis of the criminal mind. Sometimes, it boils down to that one simple question. What was the motive? And from all the statements that I have collected, I am confident that this was a murder that had to be done... It was urgent... Type one in your

nomenclature. The victim was murdered and then some clues were scrambled here and there to mislead the police.'

'You make a good point Navpreet, but we cannot ...'

The inspector's son presented himself once again, this time with a small wooden stool in his hand. He placed it in front of them and left immediately.

'Navpreet, let us not jump to conclusions,' said the inspector coolly. 'Let us go over the things we already know. Would you mind playing it down for me?'

'Sure, Sir. First things first. We found a bruise on the back of the victim's head. More than a centimetre deep. Also, the left-hand index finger was found broken. That happened probably because the victim lost consciousness when she fell on the floor. Then she was choked with a pillow. We have the doctor's confirmation, the victim died due to asphyxiation.'

'I see. That explains the pillow on the side of the body. So, it is a murder all right. A *cold-blooded* murder,' said the inspector shaking his head. 'The blow might have done it already but the murderer choked her anyway just to make sure.'

'So, do you see now why I think the murder was urgent?'

The inspector shook his head impatiently. 'What about the murder weapon?'

'We found a brick on the other side of the sidewalk just outside the back door of the victim's room. The brick actually formed the boundary to a bunch of flowers. There is no surety about that, though. It simply may be out of position. I have sent it to Chandigarh along with the pillow for further analysis. We will get the results by Tuesday.'

'Is there a possibility for an outsider to be involved?'

'No, sir. Six-feet high boundary with razor sharp barbed wire on the top. The only way to enter the complex is the front gate which is guarded by a security guard. Everything in the room was in order. No hints of burglary. It has got to be one of the nine people present in the complex yesterday.'

There was a hint of excitement in the sub-inspector's voice. The lust of chase was too endearing to him.

Inspector Rashid's wife emerged from the cottage with a huge tray in her hand. She placed it on the stool in front of them. There was coffee and an assortment of snacks on it. She greeted the sub-inspector and walked towards the garden.

The inspector looked skeptical. 'There was a board meeting in the afternoon, right? What if someone hid himself in the complex and later grabbed the opportunity?

'No sir, I talked to the security guard. Five people had turned up for the meeting. Three gentlemen and two ladies. All left. I had it confirmed.'

'What about the time of the murder?'

'The doctor arrived at quarter past seven,' the sub-inspector answered swiftly. 'Her body temperature was 93 degrees Fahrenheit. Apparently, the body temperature decreases by 2.7 degrees every hour after death. And based on the stiffness of the body and the blood clotting, the doctor said that the victim was dead for at least two hours.'

'Quarter past five or before,' said the inspector reflectively, picking up his cup of coffee.

'Yes, sir. Naina was the last one to see her, approximately ten minutes after five.'

'So, that gives the murderer around five minutes. Show me the sheet in which you noted the statements.'

The sub-inspector pulled out a sheet of paper from his pocket and presented it to the inspector. He then wrapped his hands around the cup, picked it and swallowed a teeny bit.

The inspector read the paper, while munching a snack. It ran as follows.

Naina (Accountant)

At 5.05, she went to Esha's room to discuss financial numbers. She left her room at 5.10 (Meera confirms). Then she went to Pranav's room (Pranav confirms)

Meera (Older Housemaid): First in the kitchen and then in the living room from 5.05

Mr. Pranav (Step-brother of victim) was working in his room

A minute or two after 5 PM, he went to Esha's room. He was there for a minute (Jyoti confirms). Around 5.10 Naina came to his room

Mr. Dhruv (Industrialist) was in the guest room.

Came out of the room at 5.30 when he heard Jyoti scream.

Rishabh and Arya (Step brothers to the victim) were jogging from 4.30 till 5.00

Then rested on the porch till 5.30 (Seen by Rashmi)

Mr. Anubhav (Manager, Arora cement) was watching TV in the drawing room.

A minute or two before 5 PM, sees Esha coming out of the passage going towards Rashmi's room. A minute after five, he enters Esha's room from the back door and interacts with her for a minute. Exits (Confirmed by Rashmi)

Went back to his room. Came out when he heard the scream.

Rashmi (Pranav's sister) went out to take a phone call at around 4.35. (Confirmed by the Rishabh, Arya). Seen again by them from 5.10 till 5.30

Came in when she heard Jyoti scream

Jyoti (Younger Housemaid) served tea to Esha at 4.30PM.

Went to give tea to Mr. Dhruv at 4.40PM and had a chat with him till 5.00

Went to the study room outside Esha's room after 5 PM to collect the utensils (Seen by Mr. Pranav). At 5.30 she went to victim's room. Found her lying dead on the floor.

'Great work, Navpreet,' said the inspector admirably. 'This is a complete list.' He folded the paper and gave it back to the sub-inspector 'One quick question, how sure are we about these timings?'

'Pretty sure actually.' He kept the folded piece of paper back into his pocket and began energetically. 'In normal cases, people wouldn't remember the exact time because no one notices it unless it is a routine activity. But this case is different. You remember there is a striking clock in the living room. At five o'clock, it rung five times, and the sound of the gong is audible from all the rooms. This helps us get an accurate picture of the movements that day.'

The inspector nodded.

'All the evidence points towards one direction sir,' the sub-inspector urged like a wife convincing her husband to be strict on their son.

The sub-inspector was more of the orthodox types. His brain was programmed to make immediate conclusions based on what he saw and heard. When deriving a conclusion seemed difficult, he would first have the conclusion ready in his mind, and then twist the facts as he went along. Spending time to analyse the situation wasn't his forte - for him, conclusions were all that mattered. As Sherlock Holmes would have put it, "your eyes see things, it doesn't observe." In many ways, Mr. Navpreet made a perfect Dr. Watson - a guy who chronicled Sherlock's pursuits, which in this case was the inspector himself.

'Yes, the evidence is damning,' agreed the inspector, leaning back on his chair, with the coffee mug in his hand. 'Almost everybody has an alibi between 5.10 and 5.15, *except* Anubhav. The thing with circumstantial evidence is

that it is always tricky. It might point towards one particular person but if you change your point of view a little, it can point towards a different person altogether. But, I must confess - at this juncture everything points towards Anubhav.' He paused, sipping his coffee, 'there is a saying in the army, "if your attack is going too well perhaps you are walking into a trap." For a moment, I implore you to consider other possibilities, Navpreet. Who else can it be?'

'I don't know,' replied the sub-inspector instantly, completely disinterested in troubling his mind, which already harboured a perfectly good conclusion.

There was a moment of silence,

'It could be Mr. Dhruv,' said the inspector quietly.

The sub-inspector gasped. 'But Meera... she was sitting in the living room watching TV. How could he ...'

'There are backdoors in other rooms as well.'

'Sir, his room's back door was locked. I checked.' The sub-inspector was defiant.

'How about the back door in Arya's room?'

'Excuse me?'

'Yes, Arya showed me his room yesterday. There was mud all around and the latch of the rusty back door was out of position.'

'So you are saying,' started the sub-inspector disbelievingly, 'Mr. Dhruv went out from that door, ran all the way around the house to Esha's room and murdered her?'

'I am not *saying* anything, Navpreet. And the kind of influence Mr. Dhruv has, he wouldn't involve himself in a murder. He would rather *hire* someone to do that for him.'

'You are confusing me, sir,' said the sub-inspector irritably. 'Many cases have been closed with lesser evidence than what we have here.'

'*Wrongly* closed,' added the inspector seriously. 'Fine, give me one logical explanation how that sweater went to Anubhav's room.'

The sub-inspector took his time. And then suddenly he drew a short breath. 'Sir... I think I got it. I think... while passing through that room Esha deliberately dropped it there. Some sort of a romantic gameplay. An invitation to come to her room.'

The inspector flung his hands towards the sub-inspector. Once again the sub-inspector was able to twist the facts to such an extent, it seemed believable. The inspector laughed softly and stretched himself on the chair. He wanted the sub-inspector to logically construct every possibility but now he thought against it. He left this task for himself.

'I have asked the boys to join me during the investigation.'

'Who? Rishabh and Arya? Why?' The sub-inspector seemed alarmed.

'Simple.' The inspector shrugged. 'Rishabh knows what's happening in the office and Arya knows more about home. They will be an asset during the interrogation - no one will try to trick me.'

The sub-inspector looked satisfied. Once again the inspector had surprised him with his ingenious tactics. It was the common knowledge of the town that the brothers were the only ones in the household who were close to Esha. Their mother had died during childbirth, and Esha had raised Rishabh and Arya like a mother. Her death did make them rich by a handsome amount but they were already quite rich. A smile curled the corners of his cherubic face. By taking them under his wing, the inspector made sure that he would be able to extract the truth during his interrogations. Moreover, their love for their sister would motivate them to help the inspector in this investigation. And the plan was already working - last night Arya had approached the inspector and showed him the footprints in his room.

The inspector cast a secretive glance on his wife who was walking around aimlessly in the garden. On noticing her husband looking at her, she suddenly stooped down to

entangle a twine of leaves. Her movements were too suspicious for a police inspector.

‘Is everything all right there?’ The inspector shouted.

‘Oh nothing... Just these shrubs... These wild shrubs,’ tweeted the inspector’s wife. This was an apt description of the noise that her lips made while she talked. She continued, ‘they just grow anywhere - thorns - I was meaning to get rid of them - but who has the time?’ She picked her heavy self, adjusted her black *hijab* on her forehead and walked towards them speedily.

‘You should come to my house and take a look at my back yard,’ the sub-inspector burst out laughing. ‘It’s a jungle.’

The inspector’s wife joined in the laughter, ‘is that an invitation I am hearing, Navpreet?’ The sub-inspector opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by Mrs. Rashid.

‘So what’s with you two experts - you have a murder mystery on your hands - it is a very sad thing though - Esha Arora - very sweet girl -you ask anyone - Esha Arora was a very sweet girl they will say - very committed towards her work - genuinely cared for all the employees - but fate - what can you do about it? - I’d assume you two - you must have made significant progress in identifying the murderer - sorry... sorry... I shouldn’t interfere - I am very sorry.’ She stopped to catch a breath.

The sub-inspector made a second attempt to say something but stopped short as she started again, twittering in rapid bursts.

‘There is something - I got to get out - cannot keep it inside - I am terribly sorry to interrupt - but I cannot hold it anymore - there is something I was meaning to tell you - it is very important - I have to tell you- it will give some sort of a direction to this case - not that you don’t have one already - it is just so important that you two should know

about it.' Her face twitched as if she was fighting an internal devil.

'Interesting... What is it?' said the inspector calmly looking up to his wife.

She took a deep breath. 'It is nowhere close to interesting - I have been meaning to tell you this for a long time now - Oh! It has been eating me up from within. I am a firm believer of Allah the Almighty, and I know that He has his own way to punish the sinners. But... I am the wife to a person whose duty is to get hold of people who are immoral, dishonest and corrupt. But... When I became privy to an information regarding a sinner - I chose to keep it to myself. I left the task to the Almighty - But now I realize - sometimes Allah wants us to act like his messengers - I had been a fool once - but no more - merciful Almighty,' she raised both her hands above her head, looked up towards the heavens, and then she spoke like a woman possessed. 'Merciful Allah - give me the power so that I can do what I should have done long before - because today I shall speak - today I must right the wrong.'

Inspector Rashid covered his mouth with his hand and smiled softly behind it. He was aware of his wife's skills of showmanship. But he could clearly see the effect it had on the sub-inspector who was taken aback by his wife's performance. The way she looked towards the skies with her hands raised and asked the Almighty to aid her out of her misery by providing her strength had left an impression on the sub-inspector as he waited patiently for her next words.

Mrs. Rashid continued, her voice like a machine gun pumping bullets in rapid succession:

'I am a simple person - I love to talk - I don't believe in class differences - I talk to everyone - servants, shopkeepers, milkman - everybody. As soon as others see that I am genuinely interested in their lives, they talk back - mostly about their life, love, friends, family, ambitions. Sometimes it is just gossip - other times, I get hold of some

information which is of tremendous consequence. Three months back, I came to know about Yogesh - simple guy - simple tastes - a street peddler - bought fancy clothes, watches and sunglasses from Delhi and sold them in Solan *bazaar* - no criminal record - not married - occasionally fancied a drink or two. He has many friends in Palampur because he did his schooling here. Two of them - a shopkeeper and a compounder at the veterinary clinic are his best friends - they had gone to meet him at Solan - had a few drinks with him and were looking for a place to crash. Yogesh took them to a *three-bed room flat* in a very posh locality - told them that the owner allows him to live there rent free - he just took care of the house. Then they turned the music on and had a little more to drink - his friends kept praising him about how lucky he was - one thing led to another and Yogesh claimed that the house was his. He was mocked - they laughed a lot - made fun of his work but Yogesh did not mind. Later when they were about to sleep he showed them the property deed - the flat was in the name of his sister.'

'I am sorry...' said the sub-inspector, staring at Mrs Rashid for a long moment and then turning to the inspector. 'But, I don't see any connection with the Arora case.'

Inspector Rashid offered a nervous smile, he was aware of his wife's pattern of storytelling. She was building momentum.

'I know...' said Mrs Rashid encouragingly. 'But if you know who the sister was, you *will* find a connection.' Her eyes sparkled.

'Who is the sister?' the sub-inspectors mouth opened in anticipation.

She went on with her narrative. 'Let me hold that name for a while. This lady - I have known her for some time now - a heinous woman - one of those kinds whom you see crying all the time - her face portrays pain and agony - you

naturally feel sorry for them – you feel that they are just too delicate. But...'

The first signs of discomfort showed on the inspector's face as he tapped his forehead and then ran his fingers through his hair. 'Enough of the theatrics,' he blurted, 'give that name already, will you?'

'*Jyoti*. Yogesh's sister is Jyoti.'

'Jyoti.,' repeated the sub-inspector unbelievably. 'She is a housemaid. How did she manage to buy such a house? A three-bedroom flat in Solan... I couldn't even dream of buying such a place'

'Well, that is for you to find out.' The inspector's wife gloated. 'All I can tell you is this- in that house - behind the facade of weakness - crawls a *shrewd opportunist*.

An unnecessary Lie?

Chapter VII

The inspector stopped short in front of the glass door at the Arora Mansion.

Thoughts were swirling around inside his head... the sub-inspector's observations about Anubhav... his wife's sizzling tale about Jyoti... His own views based on the timings and alibis. Nothing was convincing enough... The sense of urgency was rising within him. On the other side of the glass door, Rishabh and Arya got up from their seats, their tired eyes distant but their minds keen and ready to assist the inspector. In the next moment, the inspector rapped his knuckles on his forehead, pushed the door sideways, walked in and took a left. The decision was made. Forget everything and follow your instincts. And, the very first thing his instinct told him was - *Pranav, step brother. Possible motive - Control of the company.*

He knocked on his door.

'Come in,' Pranav bellowed from inside.

The inspector, looking excited and important, hurried towards Pranav with his arm extended. Pranav turned around on his rotating chair in front of the computer, a bright smile on his face as he sprang up to his feet - moderately tall, medium built man; a sort of a person you wouldn't remember, unless of course you are a woman and he had ogled you with his mean, pointed eyes. But, you could never forget Pranav Arora once you had a conversation with him - his loud, booming voice left a lasting impression. Pranav shook the inspector's hand and pulled out a chair out for him. Behind them, the two brothers entered inconspicuously and sat on the sofa adjacent to the door.

The room was huge, furnished grandiosely with polished dark oak furniture. On the pale blue walls hung three electric guitars and some black and white photographs of models dressed minimally. The windows were shut; it was damp and smoky and the scent of tobacco confirmed the reason behind it. The printer made a grinding sound as it spewed out paper.

The inspector sat right in front of Pranav and pulled out a small notebook from his pocket. The brothers sat at a distance almost unnoticed by Pranav.

‘Mr. Inspector, how can I help you?’ The voice was heavy, like the beats of a drum.

‘Mr. Pranav, I know you are a busy man. As you know, this is a homicide scene and I am here to ask some questions.’

Pranav immediately glanced towards the brothers as if trying to understand why the inspector had brought them along. He bowed his head down and showed no particular reaction. The printer stopped making noise.

‘I understand.’ Pranav said tonelessly.

‘One thing I can confirm with absolute certainty,’ the inspector said confidently, ‘there was no outside involvement. Does that suggest anything to you?’

‘I don’t know. *Logically* it makes sense.’ He glanced outside the window. ‘Our compound is well guarded, and the boundary walls are high. It would be very difficult for an outsider to come in and leave without being seen. Moreover, the backdoor must have been opened by Esha herself. Why would she open the door for a person she doesn’t know?’. Pranav paused, evaluating his statement. ‘But then of course, some one could have come from the front door as well, murdered her and left the back door open to throw the police off the track. It just does not make any sense. Esha did not have any enemies. She was one of the most considerate persons I have *ever* known. For us in the family, she was the one who kept us glued to each other.’

People with a booming voice normally express themselves in fewer words. Pranav was an exception to this; he had always been verbose with his explanations. Not with Esha though, with her he was succinct, sometimes even monosyllabic. In the house, his favourite subject was Rishabh. His last hour long lecture to him was about the irrelevance of management degree in being a successful manager. After the lecture Rishabh had gone to his room, closed the door behind him and shouted in a pillow.

There were a few seconds of silence. Pranav continued:

‘However... Not everyone here, belongs to the family. Mr. Anubhav, Mr. Dhruv and Miss Naina were also present yesterday.’

‘Are you suggesting one of them murdered your sister?’

‘No...No... Not at all.’ His voice thundered across the room. ‘I was just trying to recall who all were present in the house yesterday.’

‘I see.’ The inspector replied promptly. ‘Mr. Pranav, could you give us a detailed account of your movements yesterday?’

‘Certainly. Throughout the morning I was in my room. I had to prepare for the board meeting which was scheduled to happen after lunch at one o’clock. The meeting went on for about two and a half hours. My sister had asked me to prepare the latest balance sheet and show her once it was done. I was done by five. I went to her room and gave her the figures. We had a short discussion and I left within a minute.’

Rishabh jerked uncomfortably on the sofa. There was a look of disbelief on his face, and he irritably slammed his fist on his thigh. The inspector did not notice this. He continued with his questions.

‘You entered her room at five?’

‘Probably a minute or two after five.’

‘What was she doing when you went in?’

‘Nothing. She was just standing there.’

‘Where exactly?’

‘By the study table in front of the window.’

‘And was the back door open?’

‘I don’t know. I did not notice.’

‘What did you do after that?’

‘I came back to my room. At about 5.10, Naina came to my room. She had a discussion with Esha about the financial statements. We started making the changes at once.’

‘How did you come to know about Esha’s death?’

‘Around half past five, I heard a woman’s cry. I assumed it was another case of Meera aunty slipping and falling. I was on my way to the kitchen when my eyes fell on the passage. I saw Arya sitting on the floor and sobbing.’

With his head down, the inspector shot his next question. ‘What did you do then, I mean... after discovering the body?’

‘When I saw the body, I asked Arya if someone was calling the police.’

The inspector looked up instantly. ‘So you were sure Esha was dead. You didn’t think it was necessary to check whether she was still alive?’ his eyebrows narrowed. He started spinning his pen around his thumb. An old-school trick.

‘It just didn’t occur to me at that time.’ There was no emotion in his voice. It was a simple statement of fact.

Rishabh and Arya exchanged tense looks and sank into the sofa.

‘I see.’ The inspector kept spinning the pen around his thumb. After a long moment, he stopped. His eyebrows narrowed further. ‘Mr. Pranav how would your sister’s death affect you financially?’

‘Mr Inspector... I appreciate the fact you want to learn all the facts.’ Pranav exhaled heavily. ‘I can assure you that I had no financial motivation to desire Esha’s death. Our father made us financially independent, inspector. We are five brothers and sisters and according to his will, we all had

equal stakes in the property. Esha's part will now be equally divided in four parts and distributed amongst us.'

'I am sorry Mr. Pranav- I was not implying anything. I need all the facts - that is all. Can you tell me about the management of Arora Cements? Who will run the company now?'

'It comes down to me. I will run Arora Cements from now on.' His voice boomed.

'Were you on good terms with your sister?'

'Yes, of course.' Pranav replied enthusiastically. 'We were one strong unit bouncing ideas off each other, especially when...' Pranav paused he noticed the inspector's head turning towards the brothers, and at once the reason for Arya and Rishabh's presence dawned on him. He immediately changed his stance, 'but, of course we had the occasional difference of opinion... And you would expect such a thing... since we are running such a huge company... especially when we had just lost three very important contracts in the past six months... There had to be debates...'

'I see,' the inspector said curtly. 'The news on the street is that your sister wanted to sell the company to a competitor. What did you think about that?'

'I thought it was a bad decision and I told her.' Pranav admitted. 'But this was not our decision alone. There are other stakeholders. We had a formal vote and only then did we arrive at this decision. Actually, Mr. Dhruv attended yesterday's meeting to let us know the price his organization was ready to offer us and what opportunities we would have in the new organization. But, I can ensure you that despite my opinion about the future of the company, I was on good terms with Esha'

'As far as I know,' the inspector said thoughtfully, 'you were associated with the company for a duration longer than Esha did. Yet, the control of the company went to her. Did you think it was fair?'

That was a killer question and the inspector felt it immediately.

Pranav's lips were clamped. The question had touched an inner emotion. But, he chose to remain patient. He just laced the patience with sarcasm. 'Fair? Life has been very fair with me.' Pranav sneered. 'You read the newspaper, don't you?' He hurriedly shuffled through the newspaper on his work desk and passed one page to the inspector. The headline read:

TEENAGER CAUGHT ENTERTAINING A WOMAN IN HIS
HOTEL ROOM.

There was aggression in Pranav's voice. 'This eighteen-year-old kid recently signed a million-dollar contract with the biggest football club in the world. Now this kind of thing would surely raise a few eyebrows. More now, that he was caught *entertaining a woman!* You know this world inspector- it is full of hypocrites. These people will attack you for exercising your abilities, working hard, and being consistent. The liars, cheats and the serial losers suddenly find this guy a good target for attack. These same people would happily exchange lives with this teenager and would do even nastier things in his position. But they cannot, so they will attack... on what grounds... morality. What is *morality*? It is nothing but a lot of fiction used by inferiors to hold back the few who are ambitious, who sacrifice themselves for the' He was breathing heavily. 'And to answer your question, it wasn't fair, nothing is *fair*.'

There was silence and the inspector considered Pranav's answer. *Hypocrisy... Ambition... Morality...* the inspector couldn't grasp much. But, he was satisfied that the question had shaken Pranav off his cool-guy attitude. It was time for the most important question.

'Mr. Pranav, about a year ago,' the inspector said firmly, 'you had given a phone-in interview for a radio station regarding the acquisition of a cement plant. You had failed

to hang up the phone properly and you were heard calling Esha... a whore.'

Pranav sat stunned, as if he was facing a tidal wave approaching him. 'Th-That was a slip of the tongue,' said Pranav impatiently. 'I was very upset that day regarding some official decision my sister had made. A-And, I never meant it, it-it was... it just came out. I felt very sorry about it.' The initial aggression in his voice was replaced by a scared voice of a twelve-year-old boy who had been caught red handed stealing money from his father's wallet.

The inspector was convinced that Pranav and her stepsister Esha shared a strained relation. He did not push it.

'Mr. Pranav, one last question. Do you suspect someone for the murder?'

He glanced shiftily, clearly troubled by the question. 'No, I don't. It was a very unfortunate incident but I don't suspect anybody.'

Inspector Rashid got up. 'Well,' he said, a winning smile flickering across his face. 'Thank you for your time, Mr. Pranav.' They shook hands. The brothers got up from their seat too and moved towards the door. The inspector followed them.

Pranav glanced uneasily over his shoulders. 'Inspector, I don't suspect anybody but there is someone whose behaviour I found very suspicious.'

The inspector turned back. 'What do you mean?'

'Jyoti. She is the younger of the two housemaids...'

'I am aware...' said the inspector, impatiently. 'What exactly did you find suspicious about her behaviour?'

'Yesterday when I was going to Esha's room to talk about those balance sheet numbers, Jyoti was in the study room. She was standing outside Esha's room with her ears almost glued to the door. As soon as she saw me, she started collecting plates from the table. I asked her to leave the room and do the housekeeping later. She acquiesced, left

the plates on the table and started heading towards the exit while I went in Esha's room.'

The name had piqued inspector's curiosity. He gazed intently.

Pranav paused as if recollecting the moment. 'When I was coming out of Esha's room, she was still standing there... And then at once she left the room, as quickly as she could without looking back.'

'That is *strange*.' The inspector made a mental note of this statement. 'Thank you Mr. Pranav. I will see you around.' He turned and left the room.

The trio walked into the living room. The inspector wiped off imaginary sweat of his temples and said, 'Phew! Your brother is one tough nut.'

Rishabh offered him a fake smile. His mind was someplace else. It was quite unusual for Pranav to not question Rishabh and Arya's involvement in what seemed to be more of an interrogation than discussion. He could think of two reasons. One was grief. The passing away of a dear one had made Pranav nonchalant to the presence of anybody else. Second was guilt. Perhaps, Pranav was suppressing some facts and so he was just focussed on keeping the secrets within him. *Which one was it?*

The inspector reached into his pocket for his cell phone, looked into it and gave a sigh of exasperation. 'Battery is dead... Once again.' He pointed towards the phone near the television cabinet and said, 'Does that work?'

'It sure does,' Rishabh replied confidently.

'I have to call Navpreet. We are supposed to meet the owner of the Bailey's disc at one. Then, I must deal with two other cases, one with *sheep* being stolen from the *Gaddi* woman up in the hills. The other one is the case with equipment being stolen from the Agricultural University.' There was another sigh.

Rishabh cast a see-I-told-you glance towards Arya, who understood at once that his brother was referring to the

amount of time the inspector would dedicate to this case, insinuating that joining hands with him was a good idea.

‘What time is it?’

‘Almost half past eleven,’ Rishabh replied promptly.

‘So I have one and a half hour approximately. That will do I guess. I can manage three people in this duration. Can we use your room, Rishabh?’

‘Sure, be my guest.’

‘Arya, would you mind calling Jyoti. I would like to have a chat with her.’

Arya nodded and walked towards the kitchen. The inspector moved towards the telephone.

The inspector turned abruptly. ‘Arya... If you could also ask Naina and Meera to be ready? Half an hour slots. Others, I will tackle in the night before heading home.’ The inspector started punching in the numbers on the telephone. The notes the inspector took ran as follows.

Pranav’s relationship with victim – strained. Jyoti, suspicious movements. Why wouldn’t she move away from the door. Something else is going on here.

The pool of Tears

Chapter VIII

The inspector felt a wild excitement as he played with different techniques to handle Jyoti in his mind. He had two lines of attack; one was through the expensive piece of shopping she had done at Solan, and the other about the last evening when she went snooping around near Esha's room. But, he was not going to ask her this directly. The idea was to scare the truth out of the young housemaid. He did this twice every day in the police station. His piece was ready. *Fear* was his ally.

With a little help from Rishabh, the inspector had converted his room into an interrogation room. Four chairs with a small coffee table at the centre was placed right in front of the window. The room was blazing with winter sunlight and tiny worm like particles could be seen against the rays, floating in mid-air. The variety of glass items sparkled from all the corners like secondary sources of light.

I must squeeze a confession out of her, the inspector thought, biting his lip.

Arya walked in through the open door and occupied the chair to the right of the inspector, leaving the one in front of the inspector empty. When Jyoti finally appeared, inspector Rashid gave a sadistic grin and started rubbing his knuckles in a menacing way.

Jyoti slowly approached the empty chair, while the inspector studied her through his narrow eyes. She was almost thirty, brown skinned lady with hair tightly tied back making it look straight, which it definitely wasn't. She was wearing a yellow *sari* and there was a heavy gold chain around her neck. It wasn't imitation jewellery. She even had a hint of makeup on her face. The inspector eyed her with

curiosity, the obvious question - Does someone apply makeup after murdering in cold blood? Perhaps a *shrewd opportunist* does...

'Jyoti, please sit here,' the inspector said, pointing towards the chair.

Once she was seated, the inspector shuffled through his notes - his head down. No one said anything for the next two or three minutes.

Silence causes an urge to talk. An urge to talk could transform into an urge to confess. Basics of Interrogation.

'I have not murdered Esha madam,' Jyoti said desperately. 'I swear on my dead mother. You must believe me.'

'I never said you *have*,' inspector said tonelessly. More silence followed.

'You know... I was watching this thing on discovery channel last week,' the inspector turned towards Rishabh. 'Amazing stuff... The honey badger versus the King Cobra,' said the inspector dramatically. 'This badger fellow, he weighs about ten kilograms and his head rises about thirty centimetres above the ground. And then there is the cobra. Five metres long and has a venom so poisonous, it can strike down a full-grown elephant with a single bite. No one confronts a cobra... But this small fella, the honey badger is afraid of nobody. The snake hisses and bites but it doesn't scare the badger. The snake goes into the hole and the badger waits; the snake hides in the shrubs and the badger pokes it from behind, and when the snake climbs up a tree, the badger follows it relentlessly and finally,' the inspector turned, his piercing eyes riveted on Jyoti, 'the badger gets hold of the snake's head... and bites it off.'

Indirect intimidation. Another interrogation classic.

Jyoti's face had lost all its colour. She looked at the inspector incredulously, her heart beating like a drumroll. In the silence that seemed like an eternity to her, the inspector kept shuffling through his notes. Finally, he said:

‘I am getting bored here in Palampur,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I am seriously considering moving to Solan. But, then you need to first have a place to live there. Now how do I’ – the inspector stopped and turned curiously towards Jyoti. ‘You will be able to help me with this house situation... won’t you?’

‘I... How will I...’ Jyoti replied breathlessly.

‘You should be knowing that stuff,’ said the inspector slyly. ‘I heard your brother has bought a three-bedroom flat in Solan. Before he goes and buys a flat, I’d assume he’d consult his big sister.’

‘He... is just a caretaker there,’ Jyoti said, breathing nervously.

‘I see... What was I thinking? Whoosh!’ the inspector chuckled at his apparent mistake and tapped his fingers on his temple. ‘He must be taking care of the house while the wealthy owner might be living somewhere else... Correct?’

‘Yes... The house belongs to Akhil Shah. He is ...’

‘Paaaah.’ The inspector burst out laughing. ‘Yeah... what was I thinking...’

‘He is a businessman...’

‘SHUT UP YOU SCOUNDREL,’ roared the inspector. ‘You think, you can sit here and lie to my face?’ The inspector was at the edge of his seat, his eyes bulging out as he wagged his index finger towards Jyoti.

Jyoti let out a short wail. Her chair slid back a few inches. ‘I am – I am – I am not lying...’

The brothers watched, bewildered by the inspector’s sudden change of demeanour. Jyoti’s face had turned white with fear. She started sobbing. It was immediate and uncanny, as if someone had opened the tap to a reservoir.

The inspector settled back into his chair, his eyes glowing red with anger. ‘Do not play the farce of the wrongly accused. I have done my research before coming here. The flat belonged to Mr. R Satish, the famous Telugu singer. He has a summer house here in Palampur and *you* were a live-

in house keeper-cum-caretaker there. And somehow his flat in Solan now belongs to you. Isn't it a bit strange? I want an explanation and I want it right away.'

'It was a gift from Mr. Satish. Honest to God, sir. He has a very big heart. You can call him and confirm. He is in Palampur right now. I can give you his number?'

'No that won't be necessary,' the inspector declared. He decided not to press any more. The initial scare had worked, and he could see tears rolling down her eyes at a constant pace.

'Jyoti, more often than not people have found you standing by a door. They tend to believe eavesdropping is your favourite pastime. Is that true?'

Jyoti was staring at the inspector with her mouth agape like a batsman eying the umpire after a wrong decision. For a moment her crying stopped. 'No sir. Please believe me. It is totally a matter of co-incidence that people have seen me outside doors. It is because I am a housemaid and it is my duty to keep the house clean and provide for the people here.' She started sobbing again. 'And believe me sir, I am trying to do only that. I am trying my best. Believe me.'

She wiped her tears with the loose end of the *sari*.

'Tell me about your movements yesterday from about 4.30PM.'

'I made tea for Mr. Anubhav, he was watching television in the living room. Then I went to Mr. Dhruv to give him his tea. We had a small chat and ...'

'What did you two talk about?'

'Mostly about Solan. He used to live there in the nineties and as you know now I have some experience about Solan too.'

'Fine. What did you do then?'

'A little after five, I left his room and went to collect the plates from the study room. There was a meeting in the afternoon and all the plates were just lying there. It was

while I was collecting the plates there that Pranav *sahib* walked in. He asked me to leave and collect the plates later.'

'So you left?'

'Yes, I did. But then I remembered that I forgot my handkerchief there. Just when I reached there, Pranav *sahib* walked out.'

'What did you do then?'

'We left the study room together and Pranav *sahib* went to his room. I went straight to the kitchen and prepared coffee for Miss Esha and at about 5.30 I went to Esha madam's room and then ...'

She started sobbing hysterically. The inspector was feeling irritated; it was the same kind of irritation a person felt when there is food stuck between his teeth and repeated attempts to get rid of it fails.

'Did you touch anything?'

'No sir. I didn't.' The sobbing continued.

'That's enough from you. Can you send in Miss Naina? Thank you.' The inspector rushed through the words and made himself busy taking notes. Jyoti was still sobbing as she pulled herself up. She turned and headed for the door. The inspector had a few more questions to ask but he simply couldn't withstand the moaning and the crying.

'Jyoti,' the inspector roared.

Jyoti turned. 'Yes.' The tears were wiped off, and her eyes glowed with excitement, like a runner nearing the victory lap. The act was complete, or so she thought.

With his brows furrowed, the inspector said, 'you know Jyoti,' his voice firm, 'even the most poisonous Cobra should be wary of the honey badger.' He asked to leave with an imperious wave of her hand.

The glow in her eyes disappeared instantly, she turned and left the room.

'She lied to us all the way,' the inspector said irritably.

'What makes you think that?' Rishabh inquired.

‘Experience, my friend. No superstar, however big a heart they have, gifts a flat to a housekeeper.’

‘I bet he has something to hide,’ Rishabh said.

‘Maybe... But I still need a confirmation. Perhaps I will meet this big-hearted superstar sometime tomorrow.’

There was a moment of silence as Rishabh ran the facts in his head.

‘Inspector,’ said Rishabh politely. ‘You think Mr. Satish has something to hide and he gave away his expensive flat to safeguard this secret?’

‘Yes, it is probable.’

‘If he is indeed hiding something, do you think he will open-up to you, a police inspector?’

‘Hmm! You make a very good point Rishabh. If he is withholding a secret and its importance is in proportion to the flat he donated, surely he will not talk to me.’

‘May I suggest an alternative?’ Rishabh asked, a thoughtful expression on his face. ‘Will it be totally improper if Arya and I pay him a visit?’

‘I don’t see any downside to this.’ The Inspector looked down into his notebook and thought - *The chances of him opening-up in front of two grieving brothers were higher.*

His note from the interrogation was:

Jyoti - lying through her teeth. Confirmation required from Mr. Satish.

Would an industrialist chit-chat with a housekeeper for twenty minutes?

The charming Accountant

Chapter IX

The door opened and Naina walked in. She was lean and graceful, her long black hair, tipped with golden streaks, floated in high volumes covering a portion of her right temple extending to her midribs. She had a fair complexion - her sharp nose and mascara coated lashes accentuated her allure and her tight blue top accentuated her features.

‘Hello...’ She almost whispered. Her voice was lovelier than her face, soft yet clear like a small silver bell. The inspector almost rose to offer her the chair.

‘Thank you Miss Naina for coming in,’ the inspector smiled, something Rishabh and Arya saw for the very first time.

‘It is not a problem at all. This setup Mr. Inspector,’ she smiled, ‘looks exactly like an employment interview. Three people staring down at a nervous candidate while she rummages her brain for a pre-rehearsed answer. It is actually quite intimidating.’ She smiled like an air hostess welcoming the passengers on board.

‘Are you feeling intimidated, Miss Naina?’ the inspector shot his first question.

‘No,’ she smirked. ‘Why should I be? Interviews are dicey affairs. Most of the time, the interviewing panel is not even sure what they are looking for. I have given a lot of interviews; it is all about packaging the answer in a way that the interviewer likes you.’ She ended with the same smile.

The inspector gave his own version of the air hostess smile. ‘It is not an employment interview. This is a very serious matter. And I wouldn’t care for your packaged answers either. All I want is the truth. Do I make myself clear, Miss Naina?’ His smile was creepy.

‘Sure. You can call me Naina, inspector,’ she added confidently.

‘Thank you. Before we get started Naina, could you just tell me a little bit about yourself.’

‘Of course. But before I do so, let me just tell you - this is exactly the question an employer starts an interview with,’ she gave an I-told-you-so smile. The inspector wasn’t amused.

‘Naina, I don’t have all day.’ The calmness in his voice had disappeared.

‘Sorry,’ she started coolly. ‘Well... my name is Naina Banerjee. I was born and brought up in Lucknow. My father works for a bank and my mother is a housewife. I did my graduation from Shree Ram College of Commerce in New Delhi post which I worked with an accounting firm for a year. It was getting boring and I was looking for a fresh challenge. Arora Cements had an opening and the pay was good. Life at a hill station made the opportunity look even more exciting. Mr. Pranav interviewed me and I was selected. One year down the line, I am here... sitting with you all.’

In her introduction, she skimmed through a few important traits of her personality. She was hyper competitive and very ambitious in nature. When T. Lakshmi scored more than her in a Taxation and Finance test, she slipped sleeping pills in her fruit juice before the main exam. When the same girl bagged the highest package, she decided to sleep with the placement co-ordinator who promised her big things. She did see big things... but they weren’t exactly the *big things* she had gone looking for.

‘How does your Boss treat you?’

‘He is great,’ she said excitedly, the fleeting image of Pranav peeking down her blouse crossed her mind. ‘He gives me a lot of attention and allows me to take ownership of my work.’ She flashed her cute air hostess smile.

‘How about Miss Esha?’

‘She was a very talented woman. My interactions with her were quite limited. But, I didn’t like her much.’

‘Why do you say that?’ the inspector asked curiously.

‘Nothing personal,’ she replied plainly. ‘Arora Cements made a few losses and she decided to sell it off.... Her lack of courage...’

Rishabh interrupted anxiously. ‘How did you know Esha wanted to sell the company?’

‘I am not an idiot, Mr. Rishabh...’ Mr. Dhruv is here... I am consolidating the financial reports... of course the company is being sold,’ she replied sharply. ‘Moreover, your brother told me this way back.’

‘Sorry, am I missing something here?’ the inspector enquired.

‘There was a secret ballot,’ Rishabh explained. ‘Even if I were to believe Pranav told you that, there was no way for him to know which side Esha voted.’

‘There is a way.’ Naina gave an intellectual smile. ‘As you know, the ordinary board members, I mean those who don’t belong to the family, like Mr. Anubhav and the five others - their votes have a power of one. Your, Rashmi and Pranav’s votes are equivalent of two votes of an ordinary board member, and Esha’s vote was equivalent to three. The idea to not sell the company got only six votes. Pranav was in this category. Without any doubt, Rashmi voted in the same category as well. That makes four votes in total. Now if Esha would have voted in this category, then Pranav’s side would have amassed seven votes, which he didn’t.’

Rishabh leaned back on his chair pondering over the viability of Naina’s conclusion as well as the depth of the information she had.

‘Just a second,’ the inspector said animatedly. ‘Why are we so sure that Rashmi would vote in the same category as Mr. Pranav?’

‘Rashmi was not very serious about the affairs of the company. She did whatever Pranav asked her to do.’

The inspector turned towards Rishabh for a confirmation.

‘Yes. Naina is correct. Rashmi always voted in the same category as Pranav.’

‘Paaah,’ the inspector sighed.

The faces around him twitched as they let the uncanny sound sink in

‘Naina,’ said the inspector firmly, ‘can you please give me an account of your movements yesterday?’

‘I already told this to the sub-inspector... The company was being sold, and there were several things that needed attention. I knew I would have to work through the night to get all the finances in order. I told this to Mr. Pranav and he suggested, I stay here. I arrived here at ten in the morning and I was in my room all throughout the day. At 5.05 I went to Esha’s room. I had a question about the deferred tax liabilities. She made some brilliant suggestions, I noted them down and then at 5.10, I went to Mr. Pranav’s room to get it worked out. Then at 5.30 we heard that shrill cry.’

‘You never left your room before 5.05?’

‘No, I did not. Even my lunch was served in my room.’

‘What was Esha doing when you reached her room?’

‘She was sitting at her study table.’

‘Do you remember what she was wearing?’

‘I don’t know... A black sweater and a black pant probably.’

‘How long was your conversation?’

‘Three or four minutes at the max. It was as if she already knew I would be raising concern about the taxes.’

‘Then you went to Pranav’s room, and you came out as soon as you hear Jyoti scream?’

‘No. I stayed back in the room. Mr. Pranav felt it was Meera, he said it was normal, and he would check and come back. But when the cries didn’t stop, I thought I should check it out.’

‘Fine.’ The inspector clenched his hands and placed it on the table. ‘Naina, now I am going to ask you some questions

which might appear to be little personal. I hope you don't misunderstand me. I just need to get the facts right.'

'Sure,' she said, adjusting the hair behind her ear.

'How would you classify your relationship with Mr. Pranav? Was it strictly formal or was there more to it?'

She started with a winning smile as if she knew this was coming. 'I would say strictly formal.'

Taking a hint from her smile the inspector said, 'Do you know why I asked you this?'

'Certainly. The fact that Mr. Pranav shared confidential information with me might have piqued your interest.'

'You are correct. So how do you justify that?'

'Well, there is nothing to justify Mr. Inspector,' she replied confidently. 'Mr. Pranav is my boss. He was very frustrated that day when he lost the voting. I comforted him and he spewed out the reason behind his discomfort. Being a little sensitive towards your boss's needs is well documented in every industry. It is plain common sense, at last he is the one who handles my appraisals, bonuses and what not.'

'Very creditable,' nodded the inspector. 'So, how did Pranav feel about the entire thing? Was he very angry?'

'Who wouldn't be? He has been associated with Arora Cements for a period much longer than Esha. And she was planning to sell it off. He was rightfully aggrieved.'

'Very well, Naina. I don't have any further question. I would be glad if you could ask Meera to come in. She would be in the kitchen, I suppose.' The inspector turned towards Arya.

'I think... she will be just outside,' Arya seemed startled by the sudden question. 'I - I told her to wait outside.'

Naina got up, smiled and left the room. The inspector wrote his observations in his notebook.

Too confident for a young woman who was near a crime scene.

Mr. Pranav knew for a fact that Esha was selling the company. But, he was in the room all the time. Does he have an accomplice?

The inspector closed his notebook and looked up. 'That was a good question, Rishabh,' he said encouragingly, 'this is exactly why I have invited you two here. You know what is going on in the office and Arya is aware of what is happening inside the house.'

'Thank you, inspector.' Rishabh's voice was low and emotionless, and he went on, 'did you get any hints from the items you collected from her room?'

'We have sent everything to Chandigarh. Today is Sunday - nothing much would happen today. I guess the first results will come in on Tuesday. We are having her cell phone and computer looked into by some people here but I don't trust their level of expertise. I might send them to Chandigarh as well.'

There was a long moment of silence.

'And one more question, inspector,' said Rishabh curiously. 'Have you found the blue envelope?'

'What are you talking about?' the inspector looked alarmed. 'What blue envelope...'

'Esha had received a blue envelope ...' Rishabh stopped as Meera announced herself at the door.

Running Away?

Chapter X

Meera's left hand was trembling badly.

She had a fleeting vision from the time when Mr. Vishal Arora and his first wife had brought Esha into the family. Meera was standing at the door, her eyes fixed on the smiling baby, whose tiny fingers were extended towards her. The image was involuntarily replaced by Esha's lusterless body gazing aimlessly into the emptiness of the room.

She dried her eyes with the edge of her turmeric stained blue *sari*.

'You want to know what I was doing?' asked Meera slowly. 'I was in the kitchen with Jyoti. I was making tea and she was distributing it to the guests. She was supposed to make some snacks too. But she got engaged in a conversation with Mr. Dhruv and I was getting late... You might ask what I was getting late for... TV serial - mother, son and daughter in law - big drama - I watch it every day at 5PM. When Jyoti was back... I dashed into the living room. The glass entrance door was open... So, I closed it.' She paused. 'You might ask why... I am almost sixty now - Old bones cannot bear the cold, inspector. After closing the door, I switched on the TV, but I was five minutes late already.'

The inspector raised his hand indicating her to stop. He scribbled on his notepad at a terrifying speed. Meera dabbed her forehead with the edge of her *sari*. Her grey hair was messily arranged into a bun. Her large glasses made her eyes look twice the original size. She had a strange figure. Somehow, all the fat had accumulated in her stomach making it round and big, but her face seemed to be out of proportion. She looked more conical than round,

almost like an oversized bumblebee. The inspector looked up.

‘You will now ask what happened next,’ asked Meera dramatically. ‘Just then, I saw Naina getting out of her room. She walked towards the study room behind me. Five minutes later, she emerged from the door of the study room and called me. She asked me what I was watching and she also told me that her mother watches the same serial... but the thing is...’

She paused instantly, as if she had suddenly realized that something was out of place. Her eyes furrowed as she glanced at the inspector, unsure how to phrase her recent epiphany.

‘What is it, Meera?’ The inspector asked abruptly.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Meera uneasily. ‘Naina has been here a couple of times, but before this she has never spoken to me.’

‘And I guess,’ the inspector said, ‘you find this behaviour somewhat suspicious?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Meera defiantly. ‘To be honest, I don’t think she even likes me. I always felt that she is one of those kinds who looks down on people who are at a lower social status. I didn’t mind, they are all kids to me. But, that was not all.’ She paused to look for the correct words and said, ‘she hates me.’

The inspector frowned. The brothers exchanged quick glances.

‘I don’t understand,’ said the inspector interestedly. ‘Why would she hate you?’

‘Yes... that is the question. Why would Naina hate Meera. I ask why not? I am a housemaid, but I sit on the sofa - I throw orders at everyone here in this house. That is too much power for a housemaid. Those are the benefits you get when you have changed the diapers of her bosses when they were a child...’

She paused remembering the moments and her expression turned glum.

‘You know, Esha was the best among them,’ said Meera uncomfortably. ‘She was so smart, so beautiful and her heart was made of gold. Look,’ she pulled out a cell phone from her blouse. ‘She gave me this, the most expensive cell phone. Not a used one – brand new. She even taught me how to use this thing. I can call people, take pictures ...’

She broke down into tears. Arya sprang to his feet and stood behind her, placing his comforting hands on her shoulder. She tried to remember quotes from the Bhagvad Gita. One quote in particular “Whatever happens, happens for the good,” had always helped her calm down. Today, the lines felt hollow and meaningless.

‘I am terribly sorry to put you through this madam,’ said the inspector apologetically, ‘but, I got to know the facts.’

Meera steadied herself. She wiped the tears with her hand, pulled Arya close and faintly kissed on his hand. He went back to his chair.

‘I am sorry, inspector,’ Meera stuttered. ‘I don’t have any kids; she was like a daughter to me.’

There was a long moment of silence.

‘Can you tell me what happened after that?’ said the inspector calmly.

‘I saw her go into Pranav’s room.’

‘What time was it?’

‘It was about 5.10, I suppose.’

‘At what time did Jyoti go to Esha’s room?’

‘What time...’ said Meera impatiently. ‘It was the very moment Rishabh and Arya were entering the house. So, I guess about 5.30’

‘I see,’ the inspector replied, his voice stern. ‘Madam, have you seen or heard anything strange lately?’

‘Not really,’ she replied instantly. ‘Most of the time I am in the kitchen... Until day before yesterday, I was not even aware that the company was being sold. I would have

remained unaware had I not overheard Esha's conversation.'

'Conversation... What conversation?' the inspector frowned.

'Day before yesterday, I was carrying Esha's coffee to her room,' she explained. 'When I was at the door, I overheard her saying, "I will sell everything and we will run away. We will never come back. This will be our little secret."' I felt that she was having a personal conversation so I didn't disturb.'

'Who was she talking to?' The inspector asked urgently, his pen up, ready to note the name down right away.

'I don't know. I went back to the kitchen. But we can easily assume who it could be.' She shrugged.

'Excuse me,' the inspector pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. 'Are you hinting that it might be Anubhav?'

'Who else could it be?' said Meera sarcastically. 'Of course it was Anubhav. The guy was hopelessly in love with her. He used to come in unannounced and take her out. Brought her all sorts of things she liked. And, we should not forget that the guy left his high paying job in a foreign country to come work in a dusty cement plant.'

'Paaah,' the inspector sighed. Rishabh and Arya grimaced while the inspector continued confidently, 'I assumed that much... The newspapers are full of stories about their adventures.'

'Yes, I know,' said Meera earnestly. 'Esha never confessed in front of me. We, old folks, have seen a lot in this world. These kids think we don't understand anything... but we do. Those two kids were definitely an item.'

The inspector crossed his legs one over another and gazed towards the ceiling.

What is happening, he asked himself nervously. It was as if he was trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle in the dark. The newest aspect of this mystery was a troubling one. There

was no plausible motive left for Anubhav to murder Esha. Anubhav had left a lucrative job abroad in order to get along with the love of his life. Now she was ready to elope with him. Yet, that very evening they had a fight in the Bailey's disc... and somehow her sweater landed up in his room. The inspector punched a fist into his other hand.

Nothing was making sense. The puzzle was definitely missing some pieces.

Bargain for Logic

Chapter XI

The air was uncharacteristically crisp for January.

The frightening image of his sister's dead body replayed involuntarily in Rishabh's mind as he walked over a bed of manicured grass, crossed the cobblestoned path and then sat on the wooden bench under the *Peepal* tree. Arya sat by his side.

The blue envelope is gone.

The sun was straight above them, the cool wind skimmed through Arya's long hair as he watched Rishabh's movements attentively. Rishabh's eyes were fixed on the glistening snow that capped the mountains in front of them, but Arya knew that behind those dark grey eyes, the brain was processing a lot of information.

'What's in your mind Rishabh?' Arya looked uncertain.

Rishabh exhaled but did not offer an answer.

'What is it? Are you not going to tell me? The uncertainty on Arya's face rapidly turned into annoyance. 'Are you worried that since I am not studying engineering like you, I w-wouldn't be able to process the stuff going on in the big brain of yours?'

'Totally! Your little brain might explode.' Rishabh turned and tousled Arya's hair. This infuriated Arya further. He stood up, intending to leave. 'Hey... Hey... C'mon. Don't be angry, there is just a lot going on in my head.' Rishabh pleaded. 'Do you remember Pranav telling the inspector that he went to Esha's room after he completed working on the balance sheet?'

'Yeah, I remember.' Arya shrugged and sat down. 'What about it?'

'He lied,' Rishabh declared.

‘Pranav lied? Why would he do that? Are you sure?’ Arya demanded

‘One hundred percent.’ Rishabh gave an uneasy glance. ‘With all those thoughts about Esha, I couldn’t sleep and ...’ He took a deep breath pushing the image of Esha’s dead body out of his mind. ‘My mind was spinning out of control, I just wanted to engage my head in something. I thought I will complete the calculations in the cash flow statement. But, I did not have the figures for the short-term loans, so in the morning I went to Pranav and asked for it. He told me that the numbers were not ready.’

‘Fine,’ Arya said, his voice edgy, ‘What is your point?’

‘You don’t read the materials we give you, do you?’ Rishabh shook his head and continued, ‘If your balance sheet is complete, you have all the figures related to *every* financial statement which includes the cash flow statement which I was working on.’

Arya looked irked. ‘Stop patronising me – just tell me w-why you think he *lied*?’

‘Esha had asked him to come only when he was done.’

‘Perhaps, he was stuck,’ Arya argued.

‘That is a fair point but why did he not say so? Why did he lie?’

Neither of them had the answer. It seemed to be such a simple thing and yet Pranav had lied about it.

The sunlight escaping through the leaves danced on Rishabh’s face. The fluttering leaves of the *Peepal* tree delivered on a very strange kind of promise – nostalgia. Rishabh found his memories transporting him to a restaurant in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Rishabh was sitting with his friends, doodling on his notepad. It was his final year of engineering and their final project was due. The busboys were arranging the chairs, ready to close.

‘Dude, I heard you own a cement factory in India,’ Sam gloated as he tried to stuff a Chipotle Burrito.

‘That’s incorrect Sam.’ Rishabh nodded. ‘I have two elder sisters and an elder brother.’

‘Oh, that’s bad.’ Liz looked uncertain as she sipped her Coke. ‘You are fourth in line.’

Sam snatched her Coke away. ‘It is as if you own it and still you don’t.’

‘Where is it anyway?’ Liz asked.

‘You wouldn’t know. It is about five hundred kilometres away from New Delhi.’

It was correct. Sam and Liz were smart but there was no way they could know about Palampur, a small hill station in the eastern state of Himachal Pradesh. In the past two years Palampur had always been in news – it was as if someone had given it a shot of adrenaline and changed it from a silent town to an exciting community. The reason was Esha and her Arora Cements – the capacity at the Palampur plant was doubled, another plant was in construction nearby and then there was the story of the acquisition of a competitor’s plant. The heart of Palampur was beating fast, cement running in its veins, the people on the streets were rapidly transformed from greedy hill station guides to workers earning handsomely in Arora Cements and in the auxiliary companies that grew because of it.

Sam took some French fries from Liz’s plate and looked up. ‘Are you sure you want to go back to India?’

‘Yes, I am sure.’

‘Get your hands off my fries Sam,’ Liz snapped and then turned towards Rishabh. ‘Our idea is very good you know. The funding will start any day now and I think we really have a good business case.’

‘I know guys, our start-up is going to be a big.’ Rishabh gazed aimlessly at the empty chairs. ‘I have to go back. They *need* me there.’

Rishabh inhaled the cool air and tried to get his wits about him. The gravity of the situation haunted him. What

was more worrying was the fact that, while he was looking for a way to organise the pieces of the puzzle, the inspector was busy trying to catch the thief who stole the sheep from the *Gaddi* woman. Moreover, Rishabh was confident that Arya did not have any clue either, for him, he was more of a moral support than anything. He began to feel the weight of responsibility; he was alone and had a puzzle to solve.

‘The blatant lie isn’t the most important thing,’ Rishabh’s voice registered concern. ‘I am more concerned about the *blue envelope*.’

‘Is the e-envelope important?’ Arya looked skeptical.

‘Of course it was.’ Rishabh exclaimed. ‘Whatever it contained, it is gone.’ He paused. ‘Regardless, its contents were very important. Anything less and Esha would not have stepped out of a board meeting to get it.’

‘We can get more information from the security guard,’ Arya suggested.

‘I did,’ Rishabh said, his face emotionless. ‘Esha had told him that someone would show up with a package and he should call her when this person comes. A man arrived with a blue envelope at 2PM; he was young and short; and drove a small green car.’

Arya looked disappointed. ‘Nothing much there.’

For a minute both seemed to be lost in their respective thoughts.

‘I think we should go to the office,’ Rishabh said, getting up to his feet.

Arya looked stunned. ‘On a Sunday?’

‘We can still go through her calendar, her schedules...’ Rishabh barked.

‘I thought - umm - we will go visit Mr. Satish,’ Arya reminded his brother.

‘I called at his house,’ said Rishabh gloomily. ‘His housemaid said that he was out for a party last night and hasn’t returned yet.’ He sighed. ‘Film stars...’

Rishabh pulled his legs up, leaned back watching two eagles floating high up in the blue sky. There were no clues... just some anomalies. Nothing serious, no leads at all. Going to the office looking for *something* was just a start. Only, if there were a way to know what that *something* was.

There was one thing however, which was completely out of place. Esha and Anubhav's fight. They both were planning to elope and yet, they were involved in a nasty fight, that too in a public place.

Why?

Why would a couple fight?

Difference of opinion? Mismatch of expectation?

No... Rishabh replied to himself instantly. He knew Esha had an awesome temperament and he had seen Anubhav do stuff for Esha, which a man does only when he adores a woman.

Then what?

Suddenly, blood drained out of Rishabh's face... his eyes became big...

Trust? Infidelity?

Arya, who was watching his brother devotedly barked like a miffed dog. 'What? What is it?'

'Hmm...Hmm... Don't disturb,' said Rishabh impatiently, 'Let Sherlock think. May be Watson could write an article about it later.'

Arya's face fell like a scolded puppy. He looked down. Writing an article was an indirect reference to his choice of course in graduation. Literature. Rishabh believed that it was a subject chosen by people who did not have brains.

Rishabh was trying to focus harder. He wasn't blinking, his breathing pattern irregular... If it was a case of broken trust... infidelity... if indeed Anubhav was seeing someone else... then there had to be proof... Maybe there were photographs. – and – It was as if someone had switched on a bulb inside his head. He repeated the conclusion in his

mind. And the photographs were sent to her in an envelope... a blue envelope

‘Arya,’ Rishabh breathed, ‘That is it. I got the answer.’

‘What?’ said Arya slowly.

Rishabh sprang to his feet. ‘Detectives,’ he shouted. ‘The blue envelope was delivered to her by a detective...’

‘What? Why?’ Arya’s jaw dropped.

‘There is no time to explain. Common, let’s go.’

‘Where?’ Arya dragged himself to his feet.

‘The office, of course.’ At once Rishabh headed towards the gate. It was perhaps the same excitement Archimedes felt when he ran through the streets of Syracuse after making an important scientific discovery. Arya struggled to keep up.

Rishabh raced past the garage - a simple structure, not cemented - it had a steel corrugated roof mounted on poles and enough space to park six cars.

Arya’s eyes fell on something and he stopped.

‘R-Rishabh...,’ Arya cried. ‘Look here.’

‘What now.’ Rishabh turned back. ‘Hurry, let’s go.’

‘See -- see this? Arya sputtered. ‘These three cars are ours. Your car - ah - is parked outside. This red one - Anubhav’s and this grey one with Delhi registration plates - it has to be Mr. Dhruv’s.’

For a moment, the brothers stared at the accounted sedan in their garage.

Then, they knew. They stood there, excitement coursing through their veins.

Rishabh’s breath was a labored one. His eyes were fixed on the car. Disbelief plagued his voice as he said, ‘Naina drives a *Honda Accord*...’

Cold sweat dripped from his brow, as he turned towards Arya, eyes flashing.

‘Father works for a bank,’ Rishabh whispered, recapitulating Naina’s interview with the inspector. After a pause, he whispered a few more words as if trying to put

them together. 'Mother is a housewife. She worked at an accounting firm for a year. Then she joined Arora Cements.'

They both turned towards the car simultaneously. The royal blue car sparkled.

Arya gasped audibly. '*How could s-she afford this?*'

The blood in my Veins

Chapter XII

Pranav lay on his bed, head on a pillow and a cigarette burning in his right hand. Children's voices drifted through the open window. The curtains were drawn, and the room was semi-dark. Pranav's motionless eyes were fixed at the ceiling. He was feeling something – what it was, he wasn't sure. There was no simple way to describe it. Losing something you felt was yours and then getting it back. But, more importantly, he simply couldn't fathom *why* he was forced to give up something which was truly his?

You will make a very good director, son. Pranav could hear his father's empty promise hanging in the silence around him.

He felt a hot sting between his index and middle finger.

He jerked himself up, threw the cigarette on the floor and watched it burn.

The feeling of indignation fanned across his chest like a forest fire. He had done everything he possibly could to gratify his idealistic father. He worked with the labourers at the kiln, repaired cracks, carried buckets of hot *clinker* and drove trucks to make sure the assignments reached on time. He found no satisfaction in doing so, but he kept himself involved in all sorts of factory work just to make sure the control of the company was passed on to him. And who did it go to? Esha...

No one hurts more than the murderer of cherished dreams.

Why wasn't life fair to him? Why wasn't he rewarded for his hard work? The questions kept multiplying in his mind. Was being ambitious a crime? What did Esha know about the company? Was a fancy college degree more important

than the number of hours he had dedicated for the company? Why Esha? She was not even an Arora. *Why Esha...* his face twitched. The smoke from the dying cigarette swirled in front of him transporting him to the time he was cheated of something he felt was rightfully his.

It wasn't the charm of paperwork that lured a young Pranav Arora to office. The reason for his limitless dedication was his father's secretary – a young *Pahari* girl. Tall, modestly plump and pink skin – Pranav appraised her quickly. Within a few days, she found Pranav's hand swinging randomly at her – sometimes hitting against her back, other times nudging against her soft bosom.

In the summer of 2007, after completing his graduation, Pranav joined Arora Cements full time. It was a golden year. Demand for cement was at an all-time high and Arora Cements was minting money. Also, the increased workload made his father recruit another secretary.

Pranav was having a discussion with his father in the office.

'Dad, did you see the numbers?' Pranav said excitedly. 'THIRTY-EIGHT PERCENT INCREASE IN...'

'Yeah, yeah... I saw the numbers.' Mr. Vishal Arora interrupted, his head down, finger running left to right on a document.

'I don't understand,' gasped Pranav.

'Fine. Let me explain.' Mr. Vishal continued impatiently. 'Basically, there are two ways a cement company makes money. Either you locate your factory close to the place where your raw materials come from, or you produce near your demand centres.' He raised his head and eyed Pranav. 'Do you know which type Arora Cements is?'

'The first type.' Pranav's answer was immediate, his voice booming.

At this moment, the new secretary came in with a huge stack of papers. Her feet wobbled near the desk as she dumped the stack on the table. Pranav shifted his knees

forcing her to squeeze past him. He could feel the entire outline of her bottom brush against his knees. *She is lovely. Perfect.* He smiled silently.

‘Where was I...,’ Mr. Vishal said, his weary eyes fixed on the huge column of paperwork. ‘Hmmm... Yes. The nature of our business is cyclical. Currently, we are in a high demand phase and we haven’t grown in proportion to our competitors - JK Cements. Their plant in Solan is positioned closer to the demand centres and their profits are significantly higher than ours. But, that is not my concern...’

‘Then?’ Pranav asked, pulling himself out of his colourful imagination.

‘Then... Our competitive advantage is our price,’ said Mr. Vishal sharply. ‘We charge less because it is cheaper for us to acquire raw materials and JK cements spends a lot of money transporting the raw materials to their plant. But, you are seeing how they have squeezed their salary structure to reduce their total expenditure. Unethical... They have squeezed the wage structure and they don’t have a heart, forcing the labourers to work overtime. Now, with both our prices almost same, they will start poaching our long-term clients...’

True to his father’s prediction, Pranav found profits plummeting and big contracts going to JK Cements. Moreover, his father was keeping ill frequently and the onus of managing the company fell on him. Initially the senior managers and the members of the board snubbed him and treated him like a child. Very soon they realized that they were playing with fire.

Pranav never forgot anything. Those who accepted his views got increments, bonuses and promotion. Those who were audacious enough to cross him, walked away thinking how smart they were. Once they were gone, Pranav would spend hours studying their personalities, assessing their strengths and weaknesses. And then his intricate mind would patiently work out some elaborate plan to trap his

enemies and make them cry. *Pranav Arora always had the last laugh.*

Everyone he met wanted something from him: financing a new project, donation for a charity or they simply wanted to be in his good books so that he doesn't harm them in some mysterious way. This was the part of life he loved most. And at once he knew, the thing which was most important in his life. *Power.* Pranav enjoyed figuring out what these people were really after because he knew appearances were deceptive. His mind was always skeptical of the surface truth and he trusted no one. Behind the façade of charm and geniality was a calculating mind always ready to wield his power.

Bogged down by the losses, Pranav had called for an emergency meeting. The members of the board gathered around the table in the conference room, sipping coffee and helping themselves to cakes and biscuits. The general mood of the room was upbeat. As soon as Pranav arrived, there was complete silence. On seeing this he smiled to himself. Men and women who had been working at Arora Cements for decades went mute on seeing him. *Power* aroused him.

'Sorry to keep you waiting ladies and gentlemen. My father will not be able to make it. He is ill.' He placed his laptop on the table and continued, 'It is no secret that we have recently lost two big contracts. They were customers with whom we had done business for the last twenty years. Now, they are with JK Cements. If we don't act fast, we risk losing more customers. What should be our action plan for growth?'

Miss Arundhati, a woman in her late-thirties, spectacled with white chubby cheeks was the first to answer. She was the head of procurement division, a hot-shot recruit from a big MBA college. 'JK Cements are quoting a lower price than we are. Their expense on employees is significantly less than ours. But, this is not going to last long. Their union has been pressing for a newer wage structure and it has been

almost three months that they have been negotiating. The situation is quite tense there. I am sure that the management will fold, and very soon it would reflect on the prices they quote.' She ended with an assuring smile.

Pranav watched her deliver the little speech, his mouth hanging slightly open, exhaling air. In the short moment, Pranav had visualized her jumping up and down on a trampoline wearing skin tight clothes. He cleared his throat...

'Miss Arundhati, I am aware of the situation,' Pranav continued in a high tempo, 'seventy-eight days ago, a new salary structure was tabled by Mr. Shehzad Ali, the union leader. According to sources, it was torn and thrown into the dustbin. Seeing no action from the management, the Solan plant of JK Cements was out of production for four working days. Alarmed by the show of unity among the labourers and contractors, the management was forced to negotiate. According to my calculations, if they implement the latest salary structure proposed by the union and factoring in their profit margin, their quoting price would be 1.3% more than ours. Yes, that would mean business as usual for us again.' He paused, 'But that might not get us those contracts back.' Pranav matched the gaze of the board members imploring them to understand what he was trying to convey. 'That is not why I am here today. What I need is a strategy, by which we can move beyond this petty competition. Ladies and gentlemen, what should we do to become one of the biggest players in Himachal Pradesh? How do we stretch beyond, and cover even more states?'

The excitement in Pranav's voice was contagious. For the next fifty minutes the members talked about expansion, bank loans, increasing capacity, setting up a R&D cell and joint ventures. There were no concrete plans - it was all fairy tales. Men and women with more than twenty-five years of work experience, yet they could not come up with one plan

that would allow them to beat the competition. Not Pranav, he had a plan.

That night after dinner, Pranav went to his father's room.

'What did you say?' the words almost got caught in Mr. Vishal's throat. His face had lost all its colour. 'You want fifty crore rupees? That's almost how much we have in our reserves.'

Pranav remained calm. 'I don't want any money. I just want to relocate this money to the trading accounts we have.'

'Why? What are you planning to do?'

'I want to trade on the stock exchanges. It is not that difficult to predict the fate of industrial ventures. If we know which direction a stock will move, we can make a lot of money.'

Mr. Vishal offered a sarcastic chuckle. 'If it were that easy, everyone would have been a millionaire. Do you know how much research is required to identify...'

'I am already doing that research. I intend to explore the full potential of this opportunity, and that is why I am going away for the next three months.'

'Where are you going? Pranav, you are making me nervous. I am not sure...'

Pranav interrupted him again. 'Trust me dad. Relocate the money.' He left the room.

Mr. Vishal closed his eyes and leaned back on his arm-chair. He had no doubts about his son's abilities, but he was afraid of his ambition. He decided to transfer the money.

A month later, a local bus came to a screeching halt at the Solan Bus Depot. An emaciated figure got down. He was wearing an old set of clothes, his face was hard and dry, he had a thick stubble, but the eyes glowed with an odd sparkle. The tail-pipe of the bus choked out a thick cloud of

black smoke while the figure walked out of the bus station clumsily with a dirty bag on his shoulders.

Hotel *Jugnu* did not look like a hotel at all. It was a two-storeyed brick house with small windows. Inside, it was dark and smelly. The waiting room had rusty, steel chairs and the figure sat on one of them waiting for his turn. He could see a dimly lit corridor ahead of him resembling the scenes of a Hollywood horror movie. The cardboard on the wall had a drawing of an arrow on it. The word "Room" was scribbled beneath the arrow.

'Yes, you there. Come here.' A heavy-set man shouted from behind the counter.

The figure got up and approached him

'You will share the room with two other people. The rooms are down there.' The man directed to the corridor. 'You have to fill this form. Do you know to read and write? What is your name?

There was no reply. He signed on the sheet of paper. Vijay Chauhan.

'Here is your key. No fighting inside the hotel. If you have a problem, deal with it outside.'

The figure offered no reaction, he simply picked the key and walked towards the corridor. *Vijay Chauhan*, he mused to himself. It was the same name famous Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan had in the film *Agneepath*. It was ironical since in the film, everybody loved Vijay, because he cared for everyone around him. This Vijay was going to destroy everything around him. Because this Vijay was Pranav, who was here to wipe out the entire competition. He walked towards his room, with a new identity, his eyes filled with determination.

Solan was known as the "City of Red Gold" in reference to the bulk production of tomatoes in the area. It lay midway between Chandigarh and Shimla on the Kalka-Shimla National Highway, the highway that allowed JK Cements to

cater to the high demand points in Shimla, Chandigarh and beyond.

Pranav was staring at a big aluminum board, the words on it shone against the sunlight – JK CEMENTS. Beyond this rose a line of cylindrical towers with steel girders criss-crossed around it. A bridge of crane shaped steel covered the huge cement kiln – it was a huge horizontal pipe like structure that ran across the entire length of the dusty field. The kiln was two hundred meters long - almost the length of three football fields, and it was the heart of the cement plant. The raw material was fed at one of its ends while the other end was heated by a long flame to temperatures up to fifteen-hundred degrees. Once it passes through the kiln, the product called clinker, was cooled and fed to the cement mill which grinds it to the cement we see in the market. Pranav was familiar to this arrangement, what he was slightly less familiar to was the dust.

There was dust everywhere. Since, both the input and the output of a cement plant was dust, it was not surprising.

Pranav produced a letter to the guard who escorted him to the back office. It was a recommendation letter for a job at the kiln. The interviewer, an old man with thinning hair seemed impressed.

‘Boy, you know quite a bit about how things are done in a kiln.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘But, let me tell you, knowing a particular thing is quite different from working on it. At the end of the day, working in the kiln is all about the muscles.’

‘I will not disappoint you, sir.’

‘Very well then, you start today. Jagdish will help you get used to the things here. What did you say your name was?’

‘Vijay, Sir. Vijay Chauhan.’

Jagdish had ash-blond hair – it wasn’t his natural hair colour. It was the ash from the factory. The unnatural hair colour made it difficult to guess his age. There were sharp

lines on his forehead, a result of years of stress and hard work. The face was dull and like the other parts of the body was covered with white ash. His pitch-black eyes looked out of place – it radiated integrity and commitment. His bent posture gave an impression that there wasn't a single day he did not give his best at work, simply because, anything short of the best would affect his family's survival.

'Kid, you know what a conveyor screw does?' He spoke like a man who had nothing to hide or maybe he had nothing much to show. Years of hard work had left him with nothing but a routine of Eat-Work-Sleep and repeat.

'Yes, it pushes the cement around the factory.' Pranav replied obediently.

The voice was polite but it reeked of emptiness. 'Good... Good... Your work is to make sure it remains clean. Tons of cement accumulates at spots where they are not supposed to.' He pointed towards the buckets and left. His dress was of the same colour as his surroundings. Ash.

The first one month went by fast. Pranav was always working. He had picked up an extra shift and even worked during the weekends. Jagdish had helped him find a house at the edge of the valley overlooking the mountain. It wasn't as fashionable as it sounded. It was a mud house – one of the two hundred mud houses cramped in a small space behind the factory. It was small, dimly lit by a pair of kerosene lanterns. There was a half-torn mattress in the middle and a three-legged stool in the corner. The entire place reeked of urine. Kids ran with their unicycle and played with their toys in front of a drain, which ran right in front of their houses, completely oblivious to the smell.

From seven in the morning to eleven in the night, Pranav worked at the factory. He went on Saturdays too. On Sundays, he would wash his dirty clothes, hang them to dry, sweep the earthen floor and buy some *roti* from the *bazaar*, and eat it with some *achar*.

The nights were difficult; the winds were strong and icy – it went whistling around the mud house threatening to uproot it. It entered the room through inconspicuous holes and Pranav shivered throughout the night. *No problem, I can deal with this*, Pranav told himself.

One day, Pranav was busy carrying buckets full of cement from one point to another. His chest was paining and he was finding it difficult to breathe. He lowered the heavy buckets and stood in the dusty field, cursing himself. *You cannot be tired you moron; your work here is not done yet.*

He looked no different than the others in the factory, he looked like a zombie carrying dust. His face was white and so was his hair, the only thing different was the charcoal eyes which were burning with determination. He decided that pain was not a valid reason to stop. Just when he had picked up the buckets, he heard Jagdish calling him.

There was concern in his voice. ‘Kid, you are working too hard...’

‘You think so?’ He kept the buckets down and wiped off a thick paste of sweat and dust from his forehead.

‘You should take it easy.’

‘I can’t. I need the money.’

Jagdish did not offer a response. How many times had he heard that? He knew there was no solution. He quietly walked away.

‘I heard we are going to get a huge raise... Don’t we?’ Pranav said.

‘Nothing is sure. We are working on it.’

‘But we should, shouldn’t we?’ Pranav demanded. ‘I read a report in the newspaper which said that even if they give us that raise, they would still make more money than last year. You know they got two huge contracts, right?’

It was correct. Pranav's father had given an interview in which he had accused JK Cements of paying low wages to their employees and contractors. The manager at the Solan plant had dismissed these accusations as a conspiracy theory.

'No kid. Arora Cements is using this as a ploy to force the management here to increase our wages. As soon as they increase the wage, the company will go into losses. And within a year or two, it might even shut down.' Jagdish cleared his throat as he parroted something their manager had told them. 'We cannot afford that. Negotiations have been a bit tricky.'

There was a smug look on Pranav's face. 'That doesn't sound correct. I have seen the numbers.' For the next fifteen minutes, Pranav explained a few numbers which made Jagdish's eyes bulge out of the sockets.

After lunch, Pranav found himself waiting for the union leader Shehzad Ali.

Shehzad was welding one of the cracks in the rotary kiln. He climbed down the girders with an oxy-acetylene torch in his hand. He was tall, broad and shirtless. Every inch of his body seemed to be chiselled like a sculpture. But the ash played the trick again. It was difficult to say whether he was thirty or forty-five.

'And you can prove this?' Shehzad was direct with his question, his voice stentorian.

'It is simple mathematics. Addition and Subtraction. Even you can if you want. Let me show you...'

The discussion went on for two hours. With every passing moment Shehzad became more and more furious. After the meeting, all the five people who sat for it seemed both convinced and infuriated. The explanation was simple, as simple as two plus two making four, only here it wasn't. New business was coming in; the revenue added to the present revenue, minus the new wages, were much more than the profit made the prior year. Shehzad drew a

seething inhalation, his mind still unable to get the correct words for this huge betrayal.

‘Bastards! They have been cheating us ... We are going to meet that manager right away.’ Shehzad recoiled in disbelief.

Pranav could not help feel a pulse of excitement. *The plan was working.*

At five o’clock, Pranav and Shehzad arrived at the only air conditioned room in the Solan plant. The word MANAGER was emblazoned in gold on the brown, wooden door. Shehzad knocked and the manager asked them in.

‘What’s so urgent Shehzad?’ The manager spoke with his eyes set on the computer screen.

‘You will know soon.’ Shehzad said scornfully. *Bastard.*

The manager was a small, balding man who had negotiated many contracts with labourers over the years. The trick was feigned interest, he thought. Beneath the ruse of a considerate man, crawled a crafty schemer ready with an accommodating speech every time. Pranav and Shehzad occupied the chairs opposite to the manager.

The manager grunted. ‘Who is this guy?’

‘His name is Vijay. He works with us.’ Shehzad was getting irritated. ‘Can we get down to business now?’

The manager turned towards his visitors. ‘Tell me how I help.’ He smiled.

‘We have come here to talk about the wage structure.’

The manager started in a scholarly tone. ‘There isn’t much I can do; you already know that Shehzad *bhai*. I am just an employee. But I can assure you what the Aroras have been saying – it is plain business politics. We cannot afford that amount of money. We are a publicly traded company. The shareholders expect us to deliver a certain percentage of profits – Aroras don’t have that problem. If we approve the higher wages, the shareholders might ask to shut this facility down. Now do you want that? Do you?’ The manager did not pause for an answer. His voice was now

sympathetic. 'I talked to the northern region head, I tried my best Shehzad, believe me. They have promised a five percent increase in the overtime wages and believe me, this is just the start....'

Shehzad knew it was a trick. The company had added two new accounts and more work had to be done. Pay the labourers a lower wage and lure them with an increased overtime wage. It was an easy way to squeeze out more number of hours from the poor labourers. Shehzad did not say anything, he was trying hard to hold his emotions inside. He simply turned towards Pranav.

Taking cue from Shehzad's annoyed glance, Pranav started, 'sir, I looked at the annual reports. The *money coming in* last year was 11248...'

For a moment, Shehzad felt that the manager was having a stroke. Pranav talked about different kinds of numbers in the same way he had explained it to the workers. He had brought a paper glass along with him. He poured water into it and called it "money coming in." then he punched a hole into it and called it "money flowing out or wages." It was a comprehensive description of how, over the years, the manager had screwed the workers.

'Who is this guy...' the manager sputtered. He could feel a thread of sweat running from his temple down his neck as if he was standing in front of a rotary kiln.

The stage was set, and Shehzad was ready to pounce on the delirious manager. 'You can go home now, Vijay. I will see you in the night.'

Pranav stood up, bowed and left. *It was time.*

A close Call

Chapter XIII

The office room was spacious. There was a large executive teak-wood desk in the middle of the room with a window on one side. Papers were stacked in neat little piles on one side of the desk, and a thin glossy white monitor occupied the space on the other. The rotating leather chair was positioned at an angle facing the monitor. Behind it, there were framed photographs of Rishabh and Arya's father and grandfather - whose eyes sparkled with the same intensity as that of the ex-occupant of the room - Esha. The walls on the windowless side of the desk had two huge water-colour sketches. One was of a saree-clad woman, carrying an earthen pot on her head and walking through the emptiness of a village. The other was of a young shirtless boy lying prostrate under a tree gazing at the moonlit sky.

Rishabh was in a hurry. He walked towards the desk, picked up the papers from the table and dismissed them after a cursory glance. Then he worked his way through the sales invoices, purchase orders, bills, legal papers, and other documents waiting for Esha's signature. His concentration was absolute. Confidence sparkled in his eyes as he kept telling himself that he would find something... something which would strengthen his hypothesis.

His eyes fell on Esha's diary. It lay open in front of the monitor, and at once Rishabh went through the pages with mechanical efficiency. The first few pages had contact information. Next few pages had her schedule. Everything seemed to be in order; meetings in the morning followed by a variety of tasks assigned to blocks of time throughout the day- things like, discussions regarding capacity expansion,

plan for improving productivity at the kiln, contract bid review, preparation of document for safety arrangements of labourers and other tasks. Nothing unusual.

Arya pulled apart the blinds and looked out at the pine-covered-hill. A crane rose high, shining against the grey spread of clouds in an otherwise clear blue sky. Sighing ruefully, he shifted his focus on the hubbub beneath him. The work on the new cylindrical towers had just begun. Arya knew that it was part of the capacity augmentation plan conceptualized by Esha. The crane moved slowly, with a certain indifference towards both the men who traced its movements from the ground, and towards the absence of the women who used to watch it from her window. Arya stood there watching silently, thinking how life had continued with its usual pace. Around him, everything went on with the same rhythm; the similarity made him question the happenings of the preceding evening. Was that real or was it a nightmare from which there was no awakening.

For a moment, Arya looked over his shoulders and saw Rishabh sitting on his knees, going through the contents of the drawer in the table. He was feeling too tired to help his brother but more importantly he wasn't sure what exactly his brother was looking for.

Rishabh went on with his search of that one elusive thing which could support his conclusion that Esha had hired a detective to keep a watch on Anubhav. It had been twenty minutes, and the confidence on his face was replaced by frustration. What troubled him more was that Arya, instead of helping him was looking outside the window. He was about to call on him when his eyes fell on the edge of a white card. Most of it remained concealed beneath the telephone on the desk. He pulled it out. It was a business card. He concentrated on the words that were written over it. His eyes glistened like a leopard ready to pounce on a hapless deer.

‘Arya,’ Rishabh shouted, his head down examining the card like a jeweller verifying the value of a precious stone.

Arya turned back. ‘What is it...’

Rishabh sat patiently, still gazing at the index card, very much aware of the sense of excitement growing inside him. ‘I think... I have got what I was looking for.’ The happiness of discovery was evident in Rishabh’s voice. He extended his hand with the address card on it.

Arya hurried towards the desk and took the card. The words that were inscribed on the card confused him.

Rishabh’s eyes were settled on his brother. He smiled, clearly enjoying his brother’s startled reaction.

‘I don’t get it.’ Arya said, his voice feeling hollow in the emptiness of the office.

There was smug smile on Rishabh’s face. His tone was a bit condescending. ‘Esha and Anubhav were dating, and Meera had overheard their plan of running away. Yet, they had a fight in the disc, day before yesterday. Are we good till here?’

Arya nodded. ‘I guess.’

‘So, you must be wondering what went so wrong that there was such a sudden change of heart. Unless...’ Rishabh paused. ‘Unless, she was convinced that Anubhav was cheating her with someone else. Probably, Esha would have been suspicious all the while and wanted to know the truth.’ The smug smile re-appeared on his face.

Arya did not look convinced. He looked at the card once again.

*SS DETECTIVE
Palampur Bazaar*

‘How can you be so sure...’ Arya challenged softly.

‘I am not,’ said Rishabh angrily, clearly annoyed by Arya’s lack of enthusiasm about the card. ‘It is just a speculation.’

‘Okay.’ Arya took another look into the index card.

‘But, I can get it confirmed.’

Arya looked up. 'How?'

'Leave it to me. I have a plan.' He raced towards the door. 'You wait here.' Rishabh left the room and closed the door behind him.

Leave it to me. I have a plan, Arya grumbled inaudibly, making a sarcastic impression of his brother's voice.

Arya did not know what to think. He could sense that his brother was extremely confident about the index card but he wasn't sure about its importance. He looked at the card; apart from the four words, nothing else was written over it, neither an email address nor a telephone number. It was as if the detective company wasn't inclined to get itself discovered. He thought over the explanation Rishabh had provided him – what concerned him was the timing of the events. If indeed Anubhav was cheating on her, and if Esha had really hired a private detective to keep a watch over him, why would she propose to run away before the detective provided her with the results? Rishabh seemed confident that the blue envelope had the proof and it had arrived one day after Esha had proposed to run away with Anubhav. Arya felt that the argument had very little logic to support itself. He shook his head and sank into the leather chair.

Suddenly he could feel a heap of uneasiness build inside him. For a moment, he wanted to pick up the telephone and throw it towards the door. But, his sudden bout of irritation subsided in an instant, as he found himself staring blankly at the phone. It was a standard telephone, red in colour, nothing flashy about it. Arya's eyes were fixed on a single button. His mind was racing. The button with the letter R was all he could see. *Who did she call last? Could it be the detective?*

He picked up the receiver and felt a tinge of excitement ripple through him. He took in a deep breath and pressed the redial button.

The phone was ringing.

‘Hello,’ an elderly man said from the other side.

‘Hello.’

‘Who is it?’

‘I am calling... calling from Esha Arora’s office.’ He swallowed, almost unable to say the next words. ‘I... I am inspector Rashid.’

‘Oh!’ The title commanded immediate attention as the voice cracked over the phone. ‘I heard about her death. Terrible, *terrible* affair.’

Arya made his voice as heavy as possible. ‘Sir, may I know who I am talking to?’

The sense of anticipation was growing inside him. Arya could feel the room closing in on him.

‘Sir, I am Esha madam’s travel agent.’

Arya could breathe again; it wasn’t the detective he was talking to but a travel agent. There was a brief pause as Arya tried to gather his thoughts. ‘I assume Esha had booked some tickets?’

‘Yes sir. She had called in for a confirmation.’

There was nothing more to ask. For once Arya felt he could outsmart his brother by discovering the detective’s address first. *You are not the only smart one around here.* But, it wasn’t to be *this time*. He wanted to bang the receiver on the desk but he continued so that the travel agent didn’t get suspicious.

‘Can you give me the ticket details?’

‘Sure.’ Some papers rustled in the background and the voice returned. ‘It was a ticket for two, destination Barcelona.’

‘For how many days?’

‘It was a one-way ticket sir.’

In that moment, everything became clear. Esha was actually running away from Palampur. She was going to Barcelona, where she had received her bachelor’s degree and had met Anubhav. But this piece of information gave rise to a new dynamic. In the background, the travel agent

was saying something but Arya did not hear a word of it. His brain was busy analysing this newly discovered fact. *Was someone so crossed by Esha's intention to leave Palampur, that the person murdered her? But only one person knew that she was planning to run away...*

'Thank you sir... thank you for your help,' Arya said politely. 'Could you kindly mail me the ticket at...'

Arya had barely kept the receiver when the door opened a few inches and Rishabh pushed his head through. 'Let's go.'

'Where are we going?'

'Palampur bazaar, of course.'

'It's a gamble,' Arya warned.

'Ah...' smiled Rishabh, 'that's life, my friend.' He pulled his head out.

Arya gave an uneasy nod and lazily pulled himself up. He now had additional proof that Esha was indeed planning to run away from Palampur.

Arya fought to focus his thoughts. He was quite reluctant to trust his brother's hunch. But there were a few things he himself was sure about. He knew that the idea to sell Arora Cements would have infuriated Pranav the most. Anybody who knew about the case would have had Pranav at the top of their list of suspects. The motive was straightforward; Pranav never considered Esha worthy of running the company because the blood that ran in her veins was not Arora's.

There was another possibility, and that troubled Arya. Maybe someone was not comfortable with the fact that Esha was running away because ... Arya rummaged his brains, but he couldn't find a reason why someone wouldn't want Esha to leave Palampur. *May be if I can settle on one person - I might be able to dig out a possible reason.* It wasn't hard to figure out who that person could be because, only one person knew that she was planning to run away. Arya swallowed as it became clear who that person was.

The name appeared to him like a whisper in the empty space around him. *Meera*.

Rishabh shouted from the other side of the door. 'What is taking you so long?'

A whining Vespa raced with Rishabh's long exotic sedan - a bad choice of a car in a small town with narrow curvy roads. The winding road took them up and up until the town beneath them looked like a mass of green cut across by a silver brook.

It was almost dark. Rishabh tried to concentrate on the road as fog had already reduced the visibility of the narrow road which was bereft of street lights. The sides of the hill were carved and small houses stood on it at precarious angles. Aesthetically, a cluster of brightly painted houses peeping out of the green made a great view from the window of a moving car. There were lot of narrow cuts on the hill which appeared at regular intervals and were intended to be shortcuts to the market for the pedestrians. However, its steepness along with the rain induced slipperiness made a few of them unusable. The Vespa overtook them comfortably.

Arya was feeling a bit suffocated. He pulled down the car window slightly. For a moment, he considered telling his brother about Meera. But, what would he say. *Hey.. I think Meera might have murdered her. She was the closest to Esha's door... she had the means... she had the opportunity... I don't know the motive though... now that we know who the murderer is, let's call off your stupid plan to visit the bazaar.* Even inside his head, it seemed like a stupid idea.

The sun disappeared behind the mountains leaving the skies orange and purple. There was a small mosque in the *bazaar*. It was time for *adhan*, the call for the evening

prayer. Rishabh stopped in front of a small tea stall at the mouth of the *bazaar*.

‘Now I see why the driver said that he had to park outside the *bazaar*.’ Rishabh sighed. ‘It seems more like a necessity rather than a choice.’

Arya did not reply. In his mind, he was playing tennis. Alone. Every ball he struck was lost in the obscurity ahead of him. There was nothing concrete to return his ball, like his assumptions which returned no significant results. Unable to find a possible motive why Meera could have murdered Esha, Arya focussed more on the opportunity. Naina had last seen Esha at 5:10. Between then and 5:30, Meera was in the living room watching television. She had a direct access to the room, she could have easily escaped without anyone noticing, and she could have left the back door open to fool the police. Arya felt that she had the perfect opportunity, but once again he couldn’t find a single convincing reason why Meera would murder Esha. Fed up, he focussed on Rishabh and his mission.

Arya wasn’t sure why his brother was taking this risk and not asking the inspector for help. Somehow his brother wasn’t getting one simple point - The murderer was a cold-blooded schemer who wouldn’t probably think twice before killing another one. In some ways Arya’s ideology was like Lord Krishna’s. Branded as *rana-chhor*, Lord Krishna believed in running away from the battle to fight another day. Arya would have loved to run away from the *bazaar*.

‘You haven’t said a word,’ said Rishabh curiously. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Even if I say something,’ said Arya tonelessly, ‘when do you listen?’

There was a sea of people in the narrow road ahead of them. Small two-storeyed houses stood on either side of the road; the ground floor was leased to shopkeepers while the owner lived on the first floor. The mood seemed festive, almost every shop was decorated with bright lights and few

of them even had speakers hurling out latest dance tracks to lure customers in. It was an assault to the ears. It is said that music is emotion, and if emotion comes from thought, then this was a place where thoughts got squashed. It was a terrible irony considering people visited Palampur looking for peace.

Rishabh turned a corner, and parked in front of a small tea stall. He frowned. 'What are you talking about?'

Arya looked disconcerted and moved uneasily on his seat. 'Why are you doing this?'

'Doing *what*?'

'*This*,' added Arya nervously. 'This is so dangerous? Why don't you let the inspector deal with this?'

'You have already heard what the inspector is doing. He has a lot on his plate.'

'So? Now you will do what the *police* is supposed to? If you really think that the envelope is the key to this mystery, don't you think the murderer will keep an eye on this place?'

'*Coward*.' Rishabh muttered under his breath, expecting Arya wouldn't hear.

There was a moment of silence.

'You think you are *big* hero,' said Arya breathlessly. 'But, let me tell you this - this is the *real* world with very bad people. They wouldn't stop and think what degree you have before pushing a knife into your stomach.' He paused and nodded nervously. 'You think you are very brave...'

'Surely, braver than you,' Rishabh snorted. 'Listen. Truth is simple. Truth is easy. But its discovery never is. If you are looking for something as pure as truth you must first funnel through layers of lies. People are lying to us Arya, and I am going to find it out. If you want to help your brother fine, else you can sit here and wet yourself.'

Arya lowered his head, almost ready to cry.

Their fiery conversation was brought to a halt by the tea stall owner who came up to the car and shouted at Rishabh for blocking his customers from coming to his stall. There

wasn't any dedicated parking space, simply because there weren't many cars in Palampur. Overcrowded buses were the best means of transport. Their frequency was high and it was very economical. The minimum fare was three rupees.

Rishabh finally parked in front of a stationery shop which had its shutters down.

Arya's soft features grew stern as they got down from the car. 'You know what irritates me the most... is that you don't see why I am feeling aggrieved.' He gently pushed the car-door and wiped his eyes absently.

'I am sorry,' said Rishabh earnestly. 'I understand why you are upset. You are worried about our safety. But look,' he pointed towards the busy street, 'there are a million people on the street. Nobody would attack us here.'

Arya seemed a bit pleased, his voice trembling, 'I still don't understand... why not ask the inspector to do this.'

'We are already here, so let's do it. We will go home before the clock strikes seven... I promise.'

Rishabh marched forward and Arya followed with a cautious gait. Within a few moments, they were inside the pulsing market. A few metres in, Rishabh could hear someone shouting at a butcher regarding the quality of meat. The butcher shrugged, muttering a few lines of apology. A few metres ahead a shouting lady caught his attention. She was having a heated discussion about the sweetness of the cucumber which she had apparently purchased the previous day. An old man stood behind her waiting for his opportunity.

There wasn't an inch of space to keep one's feet. Arya felt that it was a perfect scene for a crime. Someone could easily push a blade inside the stomach and no one would even notice. Moreover, in a market no one would come forward to offer help to an injured victim. He had read about this, it was called The Bystander Effect - the greater the number of observers, lesser is the chance to obtain help. People are less likely to take responsibility thinking someone

else would help. So basically, if you get attacked in a teeming marketplace, you die a slow agonizing death.

Rishabh did not share Arya's skepticism - he felt the thrill of possibility. For a moment, he thought he could hear Esha whispering at him that he was on the right track. It was unclear, whether it was his dead sister's voice or his own hubris that was leading him to a possible *trap*...

They took a hard look at every shop; there were grocery stores, sweet shops, restaurants, garment and stationery shops. Rishabh looked up at a board which read SHIRT FOR YOU PHYSICS. The people working in that shop couldn't have known much about Newton or Gauss. They were tailors. Probably the board should have read Shirt for your Physique. Another board read PUMPCHURE SHOP. Rishabh looked inside the shop to understand the kind of clientele this unique shop serviced. Flat tyres and broken handle bars suggested it was a cycle repair shop.

Every now and then, the brothers would approach a shopkeeper and enquire about SS Detective. The reply would come almost instantly, coupled with an irritated hand gesture, 'I don't know,' which loosely meant GO AWAY. Shopkeepers tend to pay no heed to non-customers during busy hours. Rishabh bought a loaf of bread or a packet of sweets to start a conversation. The scheme did not work; the shopkeepers genuinely weren't aware of SS Detective.

It took an hour to scan all the shops on the main road, it was time to scan the alleys.

The alleys were dark and desolate. Shops here did not get much business and most of them had their shutters down. This space was occupied by workers and daily wage earners who chatted amongst themselves while having tea and an occasional cigarette. The residents of Palampur loved it for its bucolic peace and tranquility. Some found peace, appreciating its greenery, brooks and mountains. The ones found in the dark alleys had found a more spiritual way - Cannabis, locally called *charas*.

Rishabh could feel his motivation starting to fade. They entered a dark alley. Five men were seated on the ground smoking what seemed to be *charas*. They were alarmed by the sudden company. The brothers ignored their sordid looks and went down the passage. With darkness in front of him, and men with slightly lower moral compass behind, Rishabh felt that his curiosity had gotten better of sound judgement. The futility of the exercise was starting to dawn on him.

Just then, something in front of him drew his attention. At a dimly lit corner, he could see a small car. He cocked his head, squinted his eyes to get a better look. The car was green in colour. His thoughts raced as he tried to assemble the implication of what it could signify. The security guard's voice ran in Rishabh's ear... *a small green car... young man...* He looked around; On the first floor a shop seemed to be open. Three tube lights illuminated a portion of the wall that was colored white. The word SPY SHOP was painted on it in blue. The note below it read; One stop shop for surveillance equipment, trackers, night visions and video cameras. Rishabh stood silently, soaking in the triumph of the moment. SPY SHOP could indeed be SS Detective.

Like an eagle moving downwind, Rishabh moved towards the circular steel staircase. When he had ascended three or four steps, Arya called from behind, 'I... I will wait here. You go ahead.'

Rishabh frowned. 'It is not safe here. You have to come with me.'

Arya nodded, visibly dissatisfied by his brother's judgement. 'Maybe it is not clear to you... but I think... what you are doing is not correct. If all the secrets are up there, surely somebody is guarding this spot. I will stay here... I will stay here and keep watch.'

'Well, suit yourself.' Rishabh moved up the staircase. His skin tingled with anticipation. He needed some answers and staying on ground and arguing with his brother wasn't helping him get any.

He pushed the wooden door and entered the shop. Shelves full of equipment ranging from CCTV cameras to high-end binoculars caught his attention. In front of these shiny equipment, a young man sat with his feet on the counter and eyes glued on the television which was perched precariously over the door. It was difficult to tell the man's age. The lack of facial hair made guessing difficult but Rishabh could feel that he had come to the right place.

'Excuse me!' said Rishabh urgently. 'Do you provide detective service?'

'No.' The reply was instantaneous; the young man's eyes were still fixed on the television.

'My sister Esha Arora had...'

At once, the young man sat up like a startled rabbit. He stared at Rishabh, his eager eyes sizing up his customer.

'Well... Esha Arora,' continued Rishabh dryly, 'she is my sister...'

The young man added, 'and she is dead.'

'I am her brother. My name is ...' The young man interrupted once again.

'I know who you are. I followed you around for quite a while.'

Rishabh's face turned pale instantly. 'You followed me ...' The weight of this bit of information hung in the emptiness of Rishabh's mind. It was as if the brakes were applied to a speeding train, and the screeching sound made thinking impossible. 'You were following me?' asked Rishabh breathlessly, 'why would you do that?'

'Your sister's orders.'

Why would Esha hire a detective to watch over me? Rishabh tried to hide the distress over his face. It did not work. Seduced by the secret hidden beneath the young man's words, he burst out. 'Why were you following me?' His head had started to spin. 'What were you looking for?'

A smirk appeared on the young man's face. 'A lot of hard work has got into getting the information, sir. I cannot give it

away like this.'

'Fine!' Rishabh replied, his eyes bore into the young man's and just like that the smirk on his face disappeared. Without a doubt, Esha must have already paid this man for his detective services. Now, sensing an opportunity, he wanted to make some money out of Rishabh's misery. It had happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, there was no time to think. Till now Rishabh had firmly believed that somehow Anubhav and Esha's relationship was the reason for this detective's involvement. The pillars of that theory had been smashed by a small sentence. *I followed you around for quite a while.* Rishabh was confident that he could figure out the reason for the detective's involvement all by himself; but he would need proof which only the detective could provide. 'How much do you want for it?'

'Straight to the point. I like it. One hundred thousand.'

'That's a lot of money.' Rishabh was ready to pay more. This detective had given Esha an envelope which contained some vital information. Within hours she was dead and the envelope was gone. Rishabh felt a tinge of nervousness run down his spine. Money did not matter, the contents of the envelope did.

'Standard price, sir.'

'When can I have it?'

'Day after tomorrow.'

'I want it tomorrow.'

'Sir, there are a lot of pictures.'

'I will throw in another twenty-five thousand.'

The young man did not reply at once. He smiled, 'tomorrow at 8PM behind, Saurabh Van Bihar, near the brook. Come alone.'

Convinced that the young detective will not delve any more information until he had some cash in his hands, Rishabh left the shop. He was contemplating how lucky he had been; he had rightly guessed the involvement of the detective but the reasoning behind it had been very wrong.

Somehow by God's grace he had reached the correct place, or *did* he?

He went down the steel stairs. The homeless men who were enjoying themselves had all disappeared. There was no sign of Arya as well. *Where did this coward go? Shouldn't have included him in this. All he is good at is slowing me down.* Rishabh decided not to give him the details of the meeting. He felt slightly relieved that his brother was not there, he wanted to be alone for some time and focus on the question which was bothering him. *Why did Esha have a detective follow me?*

The alley seemed darker, the spills from the shop in the first floor the only source of light. The light flickered momentarily and Rishabh felt a rush of cold breeze brush against his face. From the corner of his eyes, he could see a shape forming on the wall, it was in line with his shadow, a metre behind him - a human form. For a moment, he could feel how wrong he had been. He felt a chill sweep through his body. What a difference few seconds could make. Moments ago, he was feeling happy that Arya wasn't near him. Now he hoped that somehow magically Arya would present himself out of no-where. The shape behind him was growing. Was someone really guarding this place? *Has someone captured Arya?* Had he walked into a *trap*?

His face went pale; mouth open he tried to suck in some air. Scared to turn around, he took a step forward. The shape of the outline on the wall grew further and he could see a hand extending towards him. Rishabh spun around and swiftly positioned himself to hold the outstretched arm of the person behind him. Then it happened rapidly, Rishabh sidestepped the outstretched arm, shifted his frame quickly and clamped his hand on the figure's shoulder.

'Oh my God, what the hell...' It was Arya.

'Why the hell are you sneaking up on me like this?' Rishabh looked confused and angry.

‘What sneaking up?’ Arya was breathing heavily. Rishabh released the grip on his shoulder. ‘The inspector had called, and he wanted us to be home by 8.30PM.’

‘Fine.’ Rishabh looked at his watch. ‘We got to hurry.’ He turned and moved away and Arya followed him. After walking a few metres Rishabh stopped short. He suddenly knew. *How naïve have I been.* Like a peal of thunder, every piece of the puzzle came crashing down on him. Arora Cements had lost three major clients in the last six months. On all these three occasions, the rivals had won the contract with the tiniest of margins. That must have made Esha suspicious, and so she had hired a professional to investigate. She did not hire a detective to keep a watch on Rishabh, she had done so to keep a watch on *everybody*.

Very few people had access to the contract documents. Someone, who was aware of the confidential information, was selling it to the rivals at the highest price. This person was somehow aware what the envelope contained and couldn’t allow Esha to read it. Thus, she was silenced.

Things had started making sense to Rishabh.

In the next moment, Rishabh could feel the horror of his logic run down his spine. He was unconvinced but the logic made sense to him. Among the ones present in the Arora Mansion the previous day, there was only one person who would want Arora Cements to stumble and fail. He closed his eyes to re-confirm the logic. When he opened his eyes, he felt more confident.

Stop at Nothing

Chapter XIV

Pranav's room was now completely dark and silent. Occasionally, a gush of cold wind would make the curtains fly, allowing the golden light from the street to briefly illuminate the room.

He sat on his bed, his unblinking eyes fixed on the window. His head was spinning with thoughts – Should he have asked for his father's opinion about his covert mission at the Solan plant? How would that have helped? Pranav was confident about his plan, and he knew it would ensure Arora Cement's dominance in the entire northern region. There are times you got to climb the mountain alone. Much valuable time is spent convincing others how beautiful it is up there.

Pranav fell flat on his bed – a series of pictures forming in his mind. Soon he could see himself in the mud house, that fateful evening after his meeting with the plant manager at Solan.

Shehzad had sent a boy to his mud house inviting him for a drink at the local bar. Pranav had readily obliged – it had been a long time since he had that blissful feeling... ogling a pretty woman. The bar was dark and stuffy with no ventilation at all. Almost everyone was smoking and Pranav felt that there was enough smoke to make the cigarette redundant. The clientele comprised of poor people from the valley who spent the first hour contemplating why they were burning their hard-earned income in drinking. By the next hour they didn't think much... alcohol took over and they danced to the beats of Hindi remix songs.

Shehzad welcomed him in. 'Look who it is, the man of the hour,' he announced lyrically, like the commercials of pills that promised weight loss. It was quite clear that

Shehzad's evening had started significantly earlier. They occupied a table at the corner of the bar. A lean man dressed in black came forward, smiled and kept a few small glasses of colourless liquid in front of them and left. *Vodka*. Pranav scanned the bar to the minutest detail. *No women*.

'You my friend,' said Shehzad earnestly, 'you are godsend, considering we were ready to sign the old wage structure. You saved us. Today we celebrate. Drink... it's on me.'

Pranav smiled and gestured with his glass. 'I am happy, I could be of help.' With no women present in the bar to leer at, he chose the second best method to satisfy himself and swallowed the entire content of the glass in one go. The liquid journeyed south but he could feel the effect almost immediately in his head. *30ml*.

'Oh!' said Shehzad excitedly, his eyes glowing with vigour as he slammed his fists on the table. 'I see I have competition. I like it.' He picked two small glasses and swallowed, one after the other. *60ml*.

Pranav shook his head. 'What did the manager say?'

'Forget what he said.' Shehzad sneered. 'Did you see the look on his face, Vijay. That furry little weasel.' He began laughing hysterically. 'He was so scared... he looked like a scared dog, ready to put his tail between his legs and run.' The magical liquid cast its spell. He laughed some more.

In the next three hours, Pranav had consumed enough to make him feel happy. Over the last three weeks, he had sacrificed the comfort of his home and stayed in a mud house. He had worked with the labourers, climbing steel girders, scratching cement off conveyer belts and disposing hot *clinkers* in heavy buckets. He felt as if the pores on his body were blocked by a thick layer of dust. But, he was successful - The manager was now convinced that the wages here must be increased and finally Arora Cements will have some cost advantage which it had always offered

its clients. *No! I am not here to retain the cost advantage. I am here to kill the competition, once and for all.*

It was eleven o'clock. The bar was almost empty; the volume of the music was mellow. Those who were present hardly knew where they were. Pranav excused himself and looked for a telephone in the bar.

'Dad, it's me.'

'Pranav. What time is it? Where *are* you?' the voice cracked.

'Never mind,' said Pranav urgently. 'Is the money ready?'

'Yes. I had transferred it a month ago.' There was a brief pause. 'Are you drunk?'

'Listen carefully... Tomorrow morning in early trade *short sell* the stock of JK Cements in open market. Use the highest leverage the brokerage firm offers.'

'Have you got any news about JK Cements?' asked Pranav's father curiously, wondering why his son was so sure that the share price would go down.

'No dad,' laughed Pranav. 'I am going to *create* news. Short sell.' He hung up.

It was midnight when Pranav and Shehzad stepped outside the bar. The air was chilling. Pranav fumbled with the zipper of his jacket while Shehzad remained completely oblivious to the cold. With almost 250 ml of alcohol in his body, not accounting the amount he consumed before Pranav's arrival, he pranced around merrily, singing the last song they had heard inside the bar.

'We should go to the park and sit for a while,' suggested Pranav, the words almost dancing on his tongue.

'Yes... We ... Park should ... Go.' Shehzad raised his arms like Subhash Chandra Bose and continued singing.

The recreational park was at the edge of the valley. It was a dark moonless night, the trees stood like pillars, standing equidistant from each other. They walked between the trees, crushing the dew-covered grass under their feet and reached the cement benches at the edge of the valley.

Beyond them was a three hundred feet deep drop into a dense forest. Further beyond, the lights of the houses on the lower hill sparkled like the stationary fireflies.

Shehzad broke the silence as they stood in front of a bench. 'It is the... happiest ... most day of my life. You know what you are... a messiah. You have come to relieve us from our pain... If you ever need anything, Shehzad will give his life to get it for you. This is... promise...'

Pranav placed his right hand on Shehzad's shoulder, arched his head backwards and looked towards the sky. The stars had disappeared behind the clouds. The darkness was complete. 'Life is not fair, my friend,' remarked Pranav seriously. 'Sometimes, the person you are ready to die for turns out to be the one behind the gun.'

Even in the paucity of light, Pranav could see the bewilderment in Shehzad's eyes as he tried to decode what Pranav meant. He wasn't given enough time to find an answer. Pranav bowed his head down and said, 'it wasn't personal.'

Shehzad felt a nudge, a calculated push. He flanked his arms trying to adjust his feet, but it didn't work.

Pranav looked straight down as Shehzad's body fell through the emptiness of the valley and disappeared into the darkness.

At a distance, a white taxi turned a corner and then stopped.

Pranav crouched, trying to hide. It wasn't effective. He broke into a run, parallel to the cliff and then turned to a path which went through the trees. He felt the torch in his back pocket, but decided against using it, at least for the time being. After sidestepping a small ditch, he found cover beneath a big tree. He crouched there, terrified... pressing his eyes beyond the trees. There was a rumbling noise and the car was gone.

Breathing heavily, he pulled out the torch, and pointed it towards the trees on the opposite direction. I must find a

way to the mud house, he thought.

Pranav's mud house was on the upper hill; he was no more than five-hundred meters from the vertical climb that would lead him there. The torch wasn't that powerful, and there was no moon in the sky to help him out. He made his way through the shrubs. It had thorns and he felt the full venom of it as he tried to find a way through them. Within fifteen minutes, he was near the climb. He grabbed a rock and pulled himself up, but he couldn't do it with the torch in one hand. He pushed it in his back pocket and tried again. He gripped one rock after another, his feet pressing down on them. Within ten minutes he craned his neck, peeking at his mud house.

Taking the shortcut through the jungle was necessary. It was imperative that no one saw him.

Without making any noise, he went inside his mud house, and picked up a big piece of rope from the corner. He kicked a plastic container on his way out. A viscous red liquid with a strong smell quickly covered the floor. Turning back, he lifted the container and threw some of it on the walls and then lit a match stick. He heard the flame come to life. He took a deep breath and stared directly at the flame. *It's almost done now.* He threw the lighted-stick and turned around without seeing the result. It was time to run back to the original spot.

Behind him, streaks of violent yellowish-red engulfed his mud house as it burnt beneath the flames.

Pranav reached the spot from where Shehzad had fallen. He looked down into the hollow abyss. Nothing was visible, except a tree which grew almost parallel to the ground, twenty metres below the edge and fifty metres away from the spot. There was a small inclined slope beside it. Pranav walked towards it, and slowly slid on it. The tree was still five metres away, it was time to use the rope. He had already tied a sharp object to it and after three or four attempts it stuck to the branch. If he could somehow scale

the five metres that stood between him and the branch, his work in Solan would be almost complete. It was risky, but it had to be done.

He could hear those winds that had troubled him during the sleepless nights. All those nights would mean nothing if he didn't make that leap.

He jumped, the knot held and he grabbed the branch. He scrambled for a footing and almost lost his grip. His muscles had hardened lifting heavy buckets of cement. He slowly pulled himself up on the branch.

He sat there motionless, both pleased and hypnotized by the sight. Swirling black smoke rose in the sky. The mud town was now ablaze – the wind had done its job. He threw the rope and it disappeared in the darkness just like the man he had pushed before. Now all he had to do was wait.

In the morning, two eager children discovered the source of the cry for help. Pranav was rescued and taken to the hospital. Police gathered around him for his statement.

'So you are saying there were five men,' asked the policeman authoritatively. 'They threatened Shehzad to step down or else they would kill him... Right?'

Pranav seemed to be in a trance. He looked straight into the wall.

'Vijay... are you listening....'

He panicked and tears filled his eyes. 'Please don't hurt me... I just told that the figures were not matching.... Don't hurt me... please...'

'You were saying there were five men...'

'Yes they pushed him down,' replied Pranav hysterically. 'I tried to run but I slipped and fell on that tree...' Pranav pulled the white sheet over him as if trying to hide from someone. His words seemed incoherent. 'They will destroy everything. They will... They said... They will kill everyone...' He was shouting now, his body shaking like a broken leaf in a tornado.

The nurse came hurrying in and the policemen were asked to leave the delirious patient.

Later in the afternoon, Pranav escaped from the hospital. The manager was murdered by the mob. The workers stripped the parts of the machines in the plant and broke the kiln. There was fire everywhere.

The share prices of JK Cements tanked.

The next day, Pranav returned, happy about his Oscar winning performance. The company had racked up a profit of a hundred and twenty crores over the investment of fifty – and that was not even the best part. Their arch rival, JK Cement's plant in Solan was now dysfunctional.

There was a huge smile on Pranav's face. 'Good morning, Dad.'

Mr. Vishal Arora was sitting on his chair, looking outside the window at the cylindrical columns that rose in the backdrop of the snow-capped mountains. Workers were putting up a new sign on one of those cylindrical column – ARORA CEMENTS. The entire backbone of human civilization, houses, building, skyscrapers, bridges, tunnels required cement for its construction – And it was produced here. He always felt happy thinking about this, but not today. He slowly turned towards his desk and pointed towards the newspaper.

'WERE YOU INVOLVED IN THIS?' Growled Mr. Vishal.

Pranav shuffled uneasily at the spot. *What is he asking?*

'WERE YOU?' Mr. Vishal's voice was louder than before. 'ANSWER ME... NOW.'

'Dad, we finally got rid of the competition,' Pranav replied earnestly. 'You know how much money we made? We can...'

'Money...' Mr. Vishal shot back, as he sprang up to his feet, both palms planted on the table. 'Is that what you think? Money...I am working for money? Don't you think I

have enough money? Why do you think I drag my sick ass to office every day? For money? He paused and looked outside the window towards the factory again. His voice choked, 'will you murder me if someone gives you a lot of money, you will, won't you?'

Pranav remained silent. The lust of power and the strive for success had made so deep a place inside him, he couldn't find an answer to his father's question. He tried to talk to himself - *why am I not answering him? The answer is simple - no Dad, I wouldn't - no amount of money can make me even think about it.* He was silent for a long moment. He tried to picture himself in such a scenario, even in his head, he simply couldn't say *no* to the offer.

'Dad, I thought it would make you happy...'

'Happy,' Mr. Vishal laughed and turned towards his son. 'What is happiness, Pranav?'

Power. More Power. Pranav thought.

'Happiness, is the state of profound human conscience - the state of enjoying self-esteem and *guiltless* satisfaction of realization of one's goals. True happiness has to have an aspect of morality, ideology and virtue - without which it just *cannot* be achieved.' His eyes were beginning to moisten. 'For years, your grandfather and I have taken less money home in order to make sure our employees, our contractors could live a decent life. And you, my own blood, made sure that thousands of poor people in Solan, wouldn't have anything to eat from today. Does that make you happy?'

Pranav could not believe what he was hearing. He had risked his life... and all his father was worried about were people who he did not even know. But for the first time he realized what gave him happiness. It was a wonderful discovery. *Power.* He felt sad for his father, the old man just did not know how to overcome challenges and called morality for his rescue.

It was clear from his son's silence, where his desires lay. He couldn't allow such a monster to run his company. Mr.

Vishal's decision was instantaneous.

The power will eventually come to me. Pranav smiled silently.

The tired Romeo

Chapter XV

It was around eight and the roads around the Arora Mansion were deserted. Inspector circled the mansion on his Jeep before coming to a halt in front of the gate and killed the engine. He gazed into the rear-view mirror. The image was hazy. There were dark circles below his eyes and a hint of a stubble on his cheeks. The faint hooting of an owl seemed to float in the silent valley as the moon peeped from behind the grey clouds in the horizon.

The inspector kept staring at his reflection. His eyes looked dull, completely clueless. If there was one thing the inspector completely disliked, it was unanswered questions and the Arora murder case presented him with quite a few of them.

Thoughts kept coming to him. PRANAV... NAINA... JYOTI... There was something missing in their statements, something the inspector felt they were hiding. If he wasn't confused enough, Rishabh had apprised him about Naina's expensive car which he felt required more investigation. From what he had judged about Naina, she was like a beautiful flame which could burn coolly inside an oil lamp, but was more than capable of burning the whole house down.

The case was getting complex. To make things worse, the district magistrate had called him asking about the progress, to which he had obediently replied, 'All is Well.' The reality was quite different. He gazed shiftily to his left. A bottle of Jack Daniels lay on the side seat, a gift in return of a favour from his previous case. He picked it up and immediately put it down; a personal reminder that he was still in control.

The inspector stormed into the house. He offered a casual 'Hello' to Meera who was sitting at the same spot as the previous day and watching TV. He went straight into Rishabh's room and his immediate reaction was of a shiver. The room did not feel remotely as cosy as it did in the morning probably because Rishabh had forgotten to latch the window. The room was softly-lit, yet the glass items sparkled with intensity. The square arrangement of chairs with the coffee table at the centre was untouched from the morning. Presently, the brothers sat face-to-face with Anubhav on their side who had his back towards the door. The inspector occupied the chair in front of Anubhav and offered him his hand.

The handshake was awkward. Anubhav looked tired, his face was completely expressionless.

The inspector grumbled something inaudible, turned around to check if the windows were actually closed, rubbed his hands and pulled out a small notebook from his jacket's pocket.

'Mr. Anubhav, thank you for seeing me in such a short notice,' said the inspector quickly, as if rehearsing the lines of a play. 'I am terribly sorry for your loss. I cannot even begin to comprehend how difficult it might be for you.' He paused. 'But, kindly excuse me if I am lacking a certain degree of empathy because I have had a very rough day myself. Let me tell you that overlooking a dispute between two people fighting for a bloody sheep is not easy. But let us not talk about that.' He opened his notebook and briefly glanced at it. 'There are a few questions I need to ask you. One in particular is bothering me the most. Do you know what that is, Mr. Anubhav?'

Anubhav looked up momentarily. He sat with his hands together and his shoulders sagging as if burdened by an enormous weight. The lack of sleep was evident from his red, watery eyes and he did not maintain a direct stare with the inspector. With his head bent down, he said, 'I think you

want to know about the nature of my relationship with Esha.'

'That is correct.'

'Esha and I were best friends, inspector,' Anubhav began sulkily after a moment of silence. 'I have known her for about six or seven years. Unlike what the people around here believe, there was nothing untoward going on between us. We first met in Barcelona, I was...'

'Can we not play these games, Mr. Anubhav?' questioned the inspector fiercely, barely able to conceal his impatience. 'I have already interviewed some of the people here and I know it for a fact that you are not speaking the truth. I am aware that *you two* were actually an item.'

Anubhav's half closed eyes immediately widened as they matched the inspector's gaze for the first time. The weary expression on his face magically turned into one of surprise. He was almost aware that his jaw had dropped slightly as he kept looking at the inspector in disbelief and sprang forward in his chair like a cobra ready to bite. 'Wh-What are you talking about.' He paused almost trying to control himself. 'I mean... How did you find this out?'

The inspector gave a triumphant smile. 'Meera, the older of the two housemaids... She overheard your conversation.'

'What conversation?' Anubhav almost shouted, wiping away the sweat that had broken out on his hairline.

'Well...' muttered the inspector softly, almost alarmed by the sudden change in Anubhav's demeanour. 'Meera had overheard Esha asking you to run away with her. Mr. Anubhav, I have done the due diligence before coming here, and I would appreciate if you could be more honest with me,' the inspector added firmly, while Anubhav nodded slightly and returned to his original posture.

'Yes, you are correct,' said Anubhav, his voice controlled but his eyes pleading. 'We were planning to elope. We wanted to get as far away as possible.'

‘I am sorry for your loss Mr. Anubhav. You already know that I am investigating this case and I need all the answers I can have.’

Tears seemed to trickle down Anubhav’s eyes as he made a conscious effort to avoid a direct stare. He briefly closed his eyes as if gathering all the courage which would be essential for the difficult questions which lay ahead of him. ‘Sure inspector, what do you want to know?’

‘Thank you for your co-operation. I promise to keep it short.’ The inspector turned a few pages in his notebook until he reached an empty one. ‘So, Mr. Anubhav, riddle me this. Why would a couple, who were planning to elope suddenly end up fighting in a local disc?’

Anubhav sighed. ‘Friday evening, we had gone to the disc. Esha seemed to be in a very good mood and we had a few drinks. To be honest, I had a lot more than she did. I have a bad habit. After a few drinks, I tend to indulge in public displays of affection. Esha is strictly ...’ there was a pause as Anubhav wiped off the tears with the back of his hand. ‘Esha *was* strictly against public displays of affection. I pulled her close, but she resisted and pushed me back.’

Anubhav’s voice began to crack. He looked up towards the ceiling as if trying to remember something in the distant past. ‘When others saw this resistance, they got alarmed. A group of boys confronted me and asked me to leave Esha alone. I explained that she was my girlfriend and I asked them to mind their own business. The music was very loud and I wasn’t thinking properly. When one of the boys shoved me, I retaliated with a punch. That’s how it all started...’

The inspector was listening intently and he seemed satisfied with the response. He had taken a detailed report from the sub-inspector who had visited the disc and had one-on-one interviews with the owner, waiters and bouncers. Few of them had seen Anubhav leaning in for a kiss and they confirmed that Esha had pushed him away. Post this, the couple had a heated discussion but none of

the waiters knew what it was about. Anubhav had lost his temper by then and he had started behaving like a lunatic, screaming at people, pushing them away. It was at that point when the band of boys showed up, one of them returned home with a black eye.

‘It is perfectly normal,’ said the inspector agitatedly. ‘One day they say that we will go to Goa during the winter and the next day they cancel it. And all of a sudden, I find myself doing the dishes.’ The inspector added a random snippet from his personal life. But he realized this soon enough and changed the subject immediately, ‘Sorry, my wife drives me crazy. Moving on, could you give me a detailed description about your movements yesterday?’

‘Throughout the morning, I was busy preparing a presentation which was due during the afternoon’s board meeting. The meeting went as planned and I believe we made good progress.’ Anubhav turned towards Rishabh looking for an approval to which he nodded almost immediately. ‘After the meeting, I went straight to my room but I got bored there. So, I came to the living room to watch some television...’

‘What time was it?’

‘I’d say it was half past four. I could see Rishabh and Arya sitting on the porch getting ready for their run.’

‘Did you see Rashmi?’

‘Yes I did. She hurried out through the front entrance shouting at someone on the phone. The sliding door screeched loudly when she closed it behind her. It was 4:35 I guess.’

‘I see. What happened next.’

‘Nothing much, I just sat there shuffling through channels. Then at about five, I saw Esha running towards Rashmi’s room. I called her but she didn’t respond. We both were quite busy throughout the morning and I hadn’t exactly apologized for...’ Anubhav paused, gazing gloomily at the ceiling. ‘... for the jerk I had been. When she ignored

me in the hall, it made me very anxious. I decided to follow her into Rashmi's room. But, I couldn't possibly go into someone's room without their permission... at last I am just a guest here... and not to forget Rashmi hates me. Anyways, after a bit of indecision, I knocked on Rashmi's door. There was no response. I knew Rashmi wasn't there so I decided to go in.' Anubhav eyes the inspector. 'There was no one inside.'

'There was no one?' asked the inspector keenly. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean... there was no one there,' Anubhav replied flatly. 'I was surprised too. But within seconds it was quite clear to me what could have happened. There was a back door connecting Rashmi's room to the guest room in which I was living in...'

'So, you are saying Esha used that door to go to your room. Why?'

'I don't know. At that moment, I felt that she was being playful.' Anubhav shrugged. 'This made me happy to an extent because I felt she had forgiven me.'

'Yes... Yes...' the inspector nodded impatiently. 'What did you do then?'

'Well... I walked into my room through that back door and Well.... She wasn't there. The back door of my room was open and she had used it to exit the room. But, I didn't see it at first, I felt she was hiding somewhere in my room. So, I first checked my room and then went back to take a quick look at Rashmi's room.'

'What time was it?' The inspector raised his pen, ready to note the important piece of information.

'Five o'clock. I remember, I heard that big clock in the living room chime when I went in Rashmi's room for the second time.'

'So, will it be safe to assume that you saw Esha a minute or two before five?'

'Yes, that sounds about right.'

Normalcy had returned in Anubhav's voice and he had started answering in a more convincing manner. The inspector immediately absorbed himself in taking notes. Meanwhile, Rishabh was doing the same thing mentally. Arya looked quite disinterested. Every now and then he was stroking his hair back which were falling over his eyes and blocking his view.

The inspector shot the next question at Anubhav. 'So what did you do then?'

'It was when I was re-entering my room that I found the back door slightly open. The futility of my exercise of looking for Esha here and there became clear to me and at once; I left my room through the back door and entered Esha's room through the back door.'

'What was she doing.'

'Nothing,' Anubhav replied after a moment. 'She was just standing there. I guess she was expecting that I would show up.'

'What did you do?'

Silence ensued once again. Anubhav looked like a tired general ready to give up. He sighed, breathed in and then sighed again finding it difficult to revisit his last meeting with Esha. 'Nothing...' he replied finally. 'I just apologized for my behaviour and she said it was fine. She told me that she had already forgiven me and she also mentioned that Pranav was supposed to show up in a few minutes. So, I left and came back to my room.'

'How long were you there?'

'Probably a minute...'

The inspector gave a slight nod and noted this down in his notebook. 'I will try to sum this up: You were watching television in the living room. At four-fifty-eight, you saw Esha going into Rashmi's room and you followed her there. She then used the series of back doors to exit the house. Once you figured that out, you went to Esha's room through the back door in her room. It was a minute after five, and

you had a small chit-chat with her. You came back to your room using the same back door. From then on, you were in your room until you heard the commotion in the living room at half past five. Is that correct?’

‘That is exactly what had happened.’

‘Great.’ The inspector cleared his throat. ‘Mr. Anubhav, I will now ask you some difficult questions. Please don’t misunderstand me, I am just trying to do my job.’ He did not wait for Anubhav’s response. ‘Is there someone you suspect for this murder?’

‘No, I don’t suspect anybody,’ answered Anubhav irritably. ‘Why would I suspect anyone? Esha was such a wonderful person and everybody loved her. She genuinely cared for people around her.’

‘Everybody seems to have the same opinion about her yet she was murdered. We need to face the facts Mr. Anubhav. There was someone who did not like Esha and I just want to know who that person might be...’

Anubhav’s voice cracked once again. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Mr. Anubhav, I think this is a good time to tell you that, almost everyone considers *you* as the prime suspect for this murder.’

‘I-I am a suspect... people think I have murdered Esha?’ It seemed as if Anubhav was hit by an imaginary hammer. His eyes seemed to bulge out of the sockets.

‘Yes, your fight with Esha was very ill-timed. Your proximity to the deceased, on the day of the incident makes it even worse.’

‘Ill-timed?’ Anubhav snapped as he covered his face with his hands, an involuntary action to control his anger. ‘You think a small quarrel is a reason big enough to murder somebody? Did you... Did you even consider the fact that she was an orphaned child who was forced to run the company which everyone believed would be passed on to Pranav? And what about the fact that Arora Cements was

making profits for ever and ever, and suddenly Esha runs it for a few years and it is making losses? All of a sudden she had decided to sell the company to their age-old rivals - JK Cements. Don't you think this might have ticked off a few people?'

'Are you trying to suggest something Mr. Anubhav?'

'I am suggesting that *money* and *power* are the most powerful motives.'

The inspector gave a daring glance at Anubhav almost sizing him up. 'Are you telling me that Mr. Pranav murdered Esha?'

Anubhav shrugged. 'It is probable. He had opposed the idea of selling the company vocally, at every step of the discussion. There were occasions when he had threatened the board members to veto against this proposal. Doesn't it sound too co-incidental that Esha is murdered minutes before she is about to sign the documents for the merger between Arora Cements and JK Cements?'

Anubhav's sudden finger-pointing towards Pranav made Rishabh very uneasy. Rishabh was replaying a particular scene in his mind; The one in which Pranav had lied to the inspector about the financial statements. He simply couldn't figure out why Pranav would lie about such a small thing. More importantly, Rishabh was worried about what had transpired at the *bazaar*. *Was it Pranav Esha was actually spying on?* Rishabh knew that it would explain a lot of things. Rishabh was in the United States when his father had elected Esha as the director. Meera had told him over the phone that Pranav had gone berserk and was not talking to anyone. *Is this how he was getting his revenge?* He tried not to think much and concentrate on what the inspector had to say.

'Why do you suspect Pranav and not Rashmi?'

'She was not interested in the business.' Anubhav dismissed the inspector's question with a sniff. 'She just

came in during an important meeting or when there was a voting.'

'And you mentioned that she isn't fond of you. Why is that?'

Anubhav shrugged. 'I can only assume that she did not like the idea of Esha dating me.'

The inspector frowned and turned towards Rishabh. Taking a cue, Rishabh said, 'I don't know whether that might be the reason. Those two weren't in good terms for as long as I have known them.'

The inspector pondered about this new piece of information. 'Mr. Anubhav, this one question is bugging me for some time now. Why was Miss Esha insistent on running away from here? Was it because of the hostile nature of relationship she had with Pranav and Rashmi, or was it because of the losses Arora Cements...'

'Losses?' Anubhav interjected. 'Have you seen her track record? The lady was an ultimate strategist, whatever she put her hands on turned to gold. The revenues have almost doubled in a period of four years. Two new plants have been in production. All because of her. One or maybe two more quarters, and Arora Cements would have started making profits again.' Anubhav paused. 'Losses,' he repeated sounding hurt. 'She was running away because she wanted to be free, inspector. She wanted to live her life on her own terms. Freedom, that's all she wanted.'

The angry Industrialist

Chapter XVI

Mr. Dhruv took a long pull at his cigar and stared at the inspector angrily. He could scarcely believe his bad luck. Just a day back, he was happily making plans about his newly acquired company - Arora Cements, which was set to be the shiniest trophy in his cabinet. Presently, he was forced to sit through the investigation of Esha's murder. And the acquisition of Arora Cements? The chances of that happening were crushed like grass walked over by a herd of elephants.

Throughout his illustrious career, Mr. Dhruv Bansal had made dozens of acquisitions but none of them were as satisfying as the one he had just missed. Right from the time he joined his father, the name Arora Cements came up in almost every quarterly meeting. This small cement plant with its humanitarian approach paid the workers more than the industry standard, and yet somehow magically managed to keep the prices down. The labour unions always used their example to cause distress among the workers. In order to keep their prices competitive, JK Cements was forced to lower their price which deeply hurt the profit margins. Couple of years ago, things had spiralled out of control. A labour strike had forced him to close the factory in Solan and consequently he was forced to sell it off to the Arora family. It was a nightmare; while signing off the papers, Mr. Dhruv Bansal had promised himself to buy back his plant in the future. And he had done so, rather he had done one step better. He had somehow managed to buy out Arora Cements completely... But, now Esha was dead and so was his dream of complete monopoly in the cement market.

Pranav would now head Arora Cements and there was no way he was going to sell-off his ancestral business.

‘I don’t know why you are wasting my time,’ said the industrialist irritably as his dark eyes settled on the inspector. ‘Esha’s death helps me in no way. I was paying good bucks to get the competition out of my face. What do I get now? Nothing. Nothing at all.’

Mr. Dhruv’s maroon, satin *pyjama* nightwear sparkled with the same intensity as the Venetian glass on the counter. His hairy chest began right under his double chin and the cloth of his *pyjama* sat perfectly over his big tummy giving it a perfect spherical look. His big, freckled face would have drawn no attention to it had there not been some food stuck in his bushy moustache.

The inspector took a deep breath and gave a re-assuring nod. ‘I understand sir. But would you please tell me about your movements yesterday.’

‘Really?’ The industrialist snapped. ‘Just when I thought there couldn’t be an easier way to waste my time...’

‘Mr. Dhruv, I am investigating a murder...’

‘Fine, I will tell you.’ He raised his arm urgently and the full sleeves slid down exposing his fat, hairy hand. Rishabh’s eyes had turned red and he had cleared his throat a couple of times already. Mr. Dhruv eyed Rishabh and leaned towards him, ‘Does the smoke bother you, young man?’

‘Yes sir. If you don’t mind...’

The next few words were drowned by the loud noise which could only be considered as Mr. Dhruv’s version of laughter. He flapped his hands like a hen running away from a stray dog. ‘These rich boys cannot deal with anything.’ He took a long pull on his cigar. ‘At your age, I was working in a plant; I used to breathe cement, eat cement and shit cement. It was like a thousand degrees in there and all you could breathe was varying levels carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide.’ The smoke from the cigar billowed over the

industrialist's head like a crown on a pompous dictator. 'If you have a problem, deal with it,' snarled the industrialist.

The inspector was reaching the end of his patience. 'Sir, if you could please...'

'Yes... Yes... I am getting to it.' The industrialist paused and scratched his head. 'I came here on Friday and they put me up in the room opposite to this kid.' He pointed towards Arya. The inspector's mind wandered to the plan of the house and the fact that Arya had showed him mud stains scattered all over the room especially near the rear door. The industrialist continued: 'Other than the meeting, I was in my room all the while... No, wait. I did go out when I heard the commotion in the living room.'

'What did you see when you reached the living room?'

'What did I see?' The industrialist heaved a sarcastic sigh. 'There was music and the people were dancing in the living room.'

'Sir...' The inspector barked, his voice sounded almost hostile. 'Sir, this is a criminal investigation. Can you not answer me directly and get over with it rather than turning it into a sitcom?'

The industrialist rolled his eyes and started. 'I saw this kid,' he pointed towards Arya, 'sitting in the passage in front of Esha's room and weeping. The two housemaids were sitting in the corner of the living room and crying at the top of their voice. Rishabh went past me, I assume towards his room to make that call to the police. That young man and woman were sitting on the sofa. I don't know their names. Pranav was comforting his sister but she was beside herself and she went to her room. At that point, Rishabh came back. Was this helpful?' The tone remained sarcastic.

'I think it was.' The inspector hurriedly went through his notes. 'Mr. Dhruv, had Jyoti been to your room prior to five o'clock?'

'Yes, she did.'

‘According to her statement, she spent around twenty minutes in your room. Is that correct?’

‘What are you getting at inspector? A love episode between a rich industrialist and a housemaid?’

‘Sir,’ the inspector recoiled. ‘WOULD YOU PLEASE ANSWER THE QUESTION?’

‘Yes, she brought coffee for me,’ Mr. Dhruv replied unfazed by the inspector’s irritation. ‘I was in a very good mood with the business I had just concluded. We talked a bit about the weather and how nice it was here in Palampur.’

The inspector frowned. He immediately turned towards Rishabh, who was already replaying Jyoti’s words in his mind. *We talked mostly about Solan. He used to live there in the nineties and as you now know, I know a bit about Solan too.*

‘Mr Dhruv, were you not settled in Solan in the nineties?’ Rishabh could sense the excitement in the inspector’s voice.

‘Solan?’ The industrialist barked. ‘Why would I live there? I have a business to run, I can’t do it from a village. I have always lived in Delhi...’

‘Correct.’ The inspector smiled. The badger had caught the cobra...

Speak one's Mind

Chapter XVII

Rashmi Arora dunked a biscuit in her coffee. Her eyes were set on Rishabh and Arya who looked away, scared by her glance of disapproval. 'What are you two guys doing here?' she barked at them. Her eyebrows were perpetually arched, only this time the angle seemed to be steeper.

Rishabh was dreading this question throughout the day and he had prepared a smart answer. But when no one bothered to question their involvement, it had become pointless to remember it. Now in the final lap, he was stuck, that too in front of Rashmi who was seething like an angry bull. Rishabh wondered how great it would have been if the murderer would have chosen Rashmi instead of Esha. He couldn't stand Rashmi at all. A week ago, she had brutally insulted him for chewing his food noisily, which was followed by a five-minute lesson by Pranav on table etiquettes.

Rishabh tried to frisk his mind, but the explanation of their presence hung there like a shapeless object. The inspector offered help.

'They are helping me, madam,' he said pleasantly. 'I hope that won't be a problem.'

'No, it isn't,' she said, her tone indicating the opposite. 'Please take your seat.'

The room was painted white - entirely white, the kind you see in the movies where an actor is dreaming about the past. The walls adorned three large pictures in ornate frames. In two of them, Rashmi could be seen dancing; in one she was dressed in a *sari* and covered with ornaments while in the other, she was dressed complete black and is brandishing a trophy and a smile. The third picture was of

three ballet dancers; they had their hands arched upwards and were standing on their toes in front of a packed crowd.

The furniture was sparse. The inspector could hear music playing in the background. The melancholic voice of the foreign singer was faintly audible and the inspector looked around for the source. On discovering it, he turned towards Rashmi only to be startled by her unnerving glance. It was as if she already knew what the inspector wanted her to do. Her eyes challenged him to speak up. The inspector decided not to. In many occasions a smile worked better than a bark. He instead offered a nervous smile.

‘Madam,’ the inspector began, his voice weak. ‘I will cut down to the chase. Yesterday you insisted that Mr. Anubhav had murdered your sister. May...’

Rashmi fired the next words like a bullet. ‘Esha wasn’t my sister. I don’t know how much you know about our family, but we are unrelated.’

The inspector’s eyes had widened, as he stared back at her piercing black eyes. Rashmi Arora wasn’t the most beautiful girl around, but her pointed, lustrous eyes had a certain hypnotizing power. She had a genial, erudite face with flowing black hair. Her voice was emasculating. It reminded the inspector of his fifth-grade teacher, Usha madam, a fifty-year-old, grey haired lady who had caught him cheating during a test. The inspector was almost afraid that Rashmi would scold him for his untucked uniform. He waited for a long moment to frame his question. ‘Fine... I want to know why you thought that Anubhav murdered Esha?’

‘I despise Anubhav,’ she snapped. ‘He is an animal.’

The inspector’s jaw dropped. He wasn’t expecting this answer. He tried to engage his mind for the next question, but Rashmi spoke again.

‘Why?’ she asked impatiently. ‘Can’t I be straight about what I think?’

‘Ye-Yeah, of course madam. But, don’t you think you are quite vocal about your resentment.’

‘Why shouldn’t I be?’ she replied instantly. ‘Rashmi Arora does what she thinks is right. She doesn’t *care* what the world around her is thinking.’

‘Sure madam. But may I know the reason behind this resentment?’

‘I felt he was a bad influence on Esha.’

‘But, we seem to understand that Esha was quite fond of him. In addition to that, we have learnt that she was planning to elope with Anubhav.’

‘Who in the world told you that?’ she barked, her eyes blazing.

‘I cannot tell you that,’ said the inspector firmly.

She chuckled. ‘That is the problem with the world, inspector. Too many efficient mouths, very few efficient ears.’

‘Would I be correct to assume, that you do not believe any of this?’

She did not reply, she just rolled her eyes in a mocking way.

‘Coming back to the original question... why do you resent Mr. Anubhav?’

‘Because, he is a womaniser. He did not *care* about Esha. He wouldn’t sit down with her and understand her desires and help her with her troubles. For him she was just another woman, a body to quench his sexual thirst.’

‘You think she was in trouble?’

‘Aren’t we all inspector?’ Rashmi snorted. ‘Since the birth of humanity, people have been in trouble. They were enslaved by kings, but they broke away. Then enslaved by pretend messengers of God who asked them to bow down to the deities or else the wrath of God would fall upon them – they broke away from them too. But no enslavement is as harsh as the one by your own self.’

The inspector had a feeling of *déjà vu*. Pranav's speech about ambition, hypocrisy and morality came to his mind.

Rashmi continued energetically. 'The enslavement that makes you believe that you should compromise your dreams and desires. The enslavement that makes you feel that your ideas, your vision would not be accepted by the society. This is the toughest battle – the biggest trouble – the fight with your own self. You fight against it every day and so did Esha. But, to believe that a man-whore like Anubhav will help Esha in this journey is preposterous – he is a selfish man and Esha somehow trusted him. I don't! I *hate* him.'

The inspector and the brothers exchanged confused glances.

'Madam, correct me if I am wrong,' said the inspector shakily, 'you surely wouldn't bless the union between Esha and Anubhav.'

'Yes, I wouldn't.' The answer was immediate, the voice resolute.

'Was it your hatred for Mr. Anubhav that made you feel he murdered Esha?'

'Of course not.' She said defiantly. 'It was not a hunch. I specifically saw him going to Esha's room through the back door. After a minute or so, he stormed out and ran to his room. I know a guilty look when I see one, inspector.'

'And, what time was it?'

'A minute or two after five... I think.'

'Yes,' the inspector said. He gazed into his notebook and then continued like a maths teacher trying to help a confused student about calculus. 'You think Anubhav murdered Esha at 5.02... But, you see, Miss Esha was last seen alive at 5.10 by Naina. Thus, the time of murder has to be somewhere in between that and 5.30.'

The tone did not go well with Rashmi. With eyebrows arched at a steep angle, she burst out. 'So, you are saying

that between 5.10 and 5.30, Anubhav couldn't have made another tour of that room?'

'We-Well,' the inspector again gazed into his notebook. Clearly, the question had caught him off-guard and he did not have an answer. After Anubhav's short visit to Esha's room, from that time on to 5.30PM, no one saw him and he could quite easily have made that tour once again. The inspector made a mental note that such a thing was possible and that Rashmi wasn't wrong. Anubhav had stormed out from Esha's room; the possible reason could be a fight or something that had terribly upset him.

'Madam... What could have Esha said in that one minute that made Mr. Anubhav so furious that he would murder her fifteen minutes later?' This time the inspector's tone was more like a student than a teacher.

Rashmi rolled her eyes once again. 'Isn't that something *you* need to find out?'

'That's exactly what I am trying to do,' said the inspector sharply, matching her glare. There was long silence post which the inspector said, 'madam, how does this situation affect you financially?'

Rashmi's eyes narrowed. 'I have more money than I would ever use, so forgive me if I haven't done the calculations yet.'

'I am sorry. I know I am sounding quite insensitive but I have got to do my job.' The inspector did not wait for Rashmi's response. 'I hear that your involvement with the business has been quite minimal and that whenever your votes were required you *a/ways* voted for the side your brother asked you to. Is that correct?'

'I don't think I am obliged to share my personal decisions with you,' said Rashmi bitterly.

'That is fair.' The inspector looked at his watch. 'I just have one last question. Is there anyone else you suspect other than Mr. Anubhav?'

‘I could not possibly answer that. I don’t intermingle much and...’

‘Madam, it was a yes or a no question.’ The inspector interrupted.

‘Every question cannot be answered with a yes or a no,’ Rashmi replied, visibly irritated by the interruption.

‘Surely it is’ replied the inspector immediately.

‘Is that so?’ Rashmi leaned forward. ‘In that case, I have a yes or a no question for you. Have you stopped hitting your wife, inspector?’

The inspector ran the yes and no sequence in his head. His voice was emotional and shifty, almost like a violin. ‘Well ...’

There was a long moment of silence.

‘Inspector,’ she raised her cynical eyebrows. ‘I know that you all feel that my brother murdered her. He seems a little rough from the outside but he would never murder Esha. Yes, he was not a big fan nor was he happy about the fact that Arora Cements was being sold on the account of some losses. But he is too practical and cunning to take such a rash decision. He always weighs the pros and cons of everything. Murdering a person with so many people around him – doesn’t look like a risk he would take.’

The inspector nodded and closed his notebook. Taking cue from this Arya moved slightly on the sofa getting ready to run away from the one person he was genuinely afraid of in the family.

Rishabh stayed glued to his spot. He knew Pranav to be a very practical person. Every move he made, he did it as if he were playing a game of chess. For a short moment, he tried to place himself in Pranav’s shoes; a man who had given his best for the company expecting that one day he would be the one running it. And suddenly, his father hands over the company to Esha. He is mad at his father but he doesn’t do anything and waits for an opening. Meanwhile he doesn’t get any chance to belittle Esha’s efforts because

she swoops in like a superhero and takes Arora Cements to new highs. He realizes that an opportunity won't magically present itself, and he must work to make things happen. What does he do? He probably sold the proposal documents to the competitors in order to bring the company to its knees. Once Arora Cements starts making losses, the board members would vote Esha out of her position and he would step in as a saviour. A perfect plan.

But, Esha was wise in the ways of the world. She did two things that Pranav had not considered at all. First, she decided to hire a private detective to keep a watch over the family members and second, she decided to sell the company to JK Cements. That derailed the complete plan of its tracks inviting Pranav to take preventive action. *Murder.*

The logic made perfect sense to Rishabh.

Pranav wasn't the only one he was suspicious about. There were two others. Both women - ambitious women who knew how to get things done. They were motivated about money and what they possessed currently could be considered unachievable by people living a life comparable to theirs. One owned an expensive flat while the other a sparkling car.

Rishabh slowly pulled himself up, his thoughts cutting through his head like streaks of lightning. *Did circumstance force Pranav to take the risk or was it greed that got the better of Jyoti or Naina's judgement?*

Obstruction of Justice

Chapter XVIII

Rishabh sat in the study room feeling a pulse of anxiety growing within him.

Naina was the first one to come in. She had washed her hair and changed into a jeans and sweater. She ran her fingers through her unkempt hair, an image one normally sees in the cover of a fashion magazine. Her earphones dangled around her neck.

One by one, Rashmi, Pranav, Jyoti, Meera and Anubhav came in. Mr. Dhruv was the last one to arrive. He occupied the empty chair near Arya, and gave a sniff of disapproval to anyone who dared match a gaze with him. Meera was cutting a few apples into quarters and filling the plastic container cradled on her lap.

Rishabh stood with an air of purpose. He surveyed the onlookers for a moment, gestured to his seat and said:

‘It is difficult to believe that just yesterday, I was sitting on this very chair listening to one of the most dynamic woman I’ve ever known. I was quietly appreciating her skills, while she negotiated an awesome deal with Mr. Dhruv.’ Rishabh gave a heavy sigh. ‘And today... I am trying to figure out who killed her.’

‘I would like to inform you all,’ continued Rishabh purposefully, ‘that the inspector hasn’t called this meeting. I have...’

Bewildered, wondering what Rishabh had to say, Meera looked up, suspending her fruit-slicing activity.

‘Arya and I had the privilege of listening to your statements,’ said Rishabh sternly, taking a step forward. ‘I would like to share my observations about it. Before I do that, I would like to talk about something called *obstruction*

of justice.' He swiftly took his phone out of his pocket and began reading from it in a monotonous tone, 'any act, that amounts to creating impediments, interferes or obstructs the free flow of administration of justice is punishable by law. It includes using force or influence in preventing the respondent from putting forward the facts. Obstruction of justice can be a felony or misdemeanour depending on the court. Lying to a police officer is a misdemeanour while theft of a relevant document qualifies as a felony.' He paused and glanced at the confused onlookers in front of him. 'Punishments can range from six months to ten years in jail.' He added.

'I don't understand... *Why* are you telling us this?' asked Pranav grumpily, as his booming voice startled Jyoti out of her reverie.

Rishabh kept the phone back into his pocket. 'I heard all your statements and I processed it logically. It is quite clear that *some* of you have tampered with the facts.' Rishabh bluffed confidently. 'I feel it is my duty to make *them* aware that such things are punishable by law. The inspector has already made some breakthroughs related to it.' He paused and let the bluff settle.

'So, it will be *wise* for them to come forward and tell the truth,' Rishabh proposed seriously. 'Also, some of you might be holding on to some important information. You need to understand that sometimes hidden truth can be more poisonous than a spoken lie.'

Silence ensued as everyone stared at Rishabh. In the next moment, all eyes turned to Arya who produced a notebook and began writing on it. Rishabh had asked him to do that. *Theatrics*.

'The second thing that I wanted to say,' Rishabh paused and cleared his throat. 'The murderer is amongst us - and I know who it is.'

Jyoti's jaw fell visibly. Even Mr. Dhruv looked vaguely panic-stricken. It felt like someone had sucked out the air

from the room.

Arya tried to comprehend the words he was hearing. Prior to the meeting, Rishabh had apprised him of making an announcement, post which Arya was supposed to note everyone's reactions. But not in his wildest dreams had he imagined that Rishabh would openly declare that he knew the identity of the murderer. He felt a knot form in his stomach. Surprisingly, he felt that his own reaction was the most out of place.

Arya took refuge in perusing the blank page of his notebook. He scanned the facts in his mind – going to the *bazaar* was obviously the correct move, Arya conceded rather defiantly. Now they had a lead – they knew exactly what the envelope contained. Yet it was just a lead...nothing more. But, had his brother already guessed the name?

For a moment, Arya considered the possibility of Rishabh deriving the name of the perpetrator. He repeated Rishabh's statement in his mind - *The murderer is amongst us*. He stopped there trying to understand the reason behind this announcement – If the murderer was indeed sitting right in front of them, why was Rishabh trying to incense the culprit and risk his own life? Arya felt a sudden shiver. The surprise on his face was rapidly replaced by concern. Once again, his brother was trying to overplay his hand.

Through the hum of anxiety, a chord of laughter caught everyone's attention. Pranav threw his head back on his chair and laughed hysterically. 'Baloney,' he shouted and continued laughing. After catching the attention of those present in the room, he began in a patronising tone:

'Rishabh, you talk exactly like the mighty Sherlock Holmes from those best-selling novels.' He looked around with a sense of satisfaction and then continued, 'let me tell you what happens in these novels. The detective is invited to solve a case – he looks around – within hours he has everything sorted out in his head. He knows everything – who left the room when, what is the motive, the time of

murder... everything. But he doesn't have the proof to substantiate his theory. So, he calls a meeting, *much like this one*, and tells that he knows who the murderer is. The murderer is alarmed and does something stupid.' His voice intensifying now, 'and then, Mr. Sherlock catches him red handed.'

Rashmi seemed alarmed, she made the familiar frown on her face. 'Is that so Rishabh? Is this some kind of a ruse?'

'I know who the murderer is,' Rishabh insisted.

'Who is it?'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Classic...' Pranav interrupted and glanced towards Rashmi, 'Now ask him why he can't?'

Rashmi looked up to Rishabh, her eye brows arched at acute angles demanding an answer.

'I know who it is,' said Rishabh uneasily.

'Just spill it out.' Rashmi rebuked.

'I cannot until I get the proof. Forensic evidence will substantiate my claim, but those results will not arrive till Tuesday morning, so you all must wait.'

'I don't understand.' Rashmi pressed, her tone firm. 'If you are so sure about this, you should tell us the name. If your reasoning is incontrovertible, we will ask the inspector to hold this person in custody till Tuesday.'

'Try and understand Rashmi,' Rishabh said in a pleading tone. 'I have full faith on my reasoning but if it turns to be wrong, I risk damaging my relationship permanently with that person.'

Pranav shrugged in disbelief.

'It seems like a good idea. Lure in the murderer by putting yourself as bait. Awesome!' Mr. Dhruv guffawed, his laughter ringing out in the silent room. His idea primarily was to ease the tension, but it didn't work out as Meera gave him a reproachful look.

'So, it has come down to this,' Meera observed in a plaintive voice

Meanwhile, Arya couldn't help feel inspired by the authoritative way Rishabh was defending his views. But it was not sufficient to wipe out the concerns about his safety. It was clear as daylight that Rashmi and Pranav were skeptical about his claim but what if the murderer was less inclined to take chances?

Anubhav gave a dry little cough and began intently, 'I understand your point Rishabh, but wouldn't this alarm the murderer and provide him the time to escape or maybe get rid of some evidence which the police have not found out yet?'

Rishabh shook his head. 'There is no escape,' he said aggressively, 'I know for sure that everybody here is holding on to a secret - some intentionally and others ignorant of the value it lends to this case.' He paused, looked around and then spoke forcefully, 'It doesn't matter if you come up to me and reveal your secret... or choose to remain silent... *Either way, Rishabh Arora will discover the truth.*'

Confessions of a gentle Soul

Chapter XIX

Rishabh gripped the polished railing on the porch and bent over it. The mug of steaming coffee didn't work its magic as it had done previously. The air was cold, the sun barely visible through the dense fog made the Arora Mansion look like a solitary building standing on an enormous piece of land. Everything looked very normal, except it wasn't. Rishabh stared vacantly at the garden, still trying to arrange the pieces of the puzzle. The feeling of exhaustion settled over him as he turned to his brother and muttered.

'Something happened last night.'

Arya took a nervous bite of his biscuit, and glanced towards his brother, his sleepy eyes suddenly glowing with curiosity.

'Let us go for a walk,' said Rishabh calmly, moving clumsily towards the steps.

Arya swallowed of what was left of his biscuit, rubbed his hands and followed his brother towards the wooden benches. 'You were saying something happened la-last night?' he asked eagerly.

Rishabh glanced towards his brother and cleared his throat. 'The inspector was correct about Jyoti.'

'She was lying huh... the flat... the actor's gift,' began Arya agitatedly. 'From the beginning... the very beginning I could sense ...'

'It does not matter.' Rishabh cut him off, making little effort to hide his frustration. 'What really matters is her confession.'

Arya looked thunderstruck. 'Sh-She confessed? What did she say?'

‘She confessed that Pranav had asked her to leave the study room, but knowingly she didn’t.’

‘WHY...’ Arya threw a glance of disbelief to his brother. ‘Oh... I get it now, surely she... she was spying on Esha...’ Arya drew a short breath, as if trying to calm himself. ‘Did she confess... did she confess leaking the contract documents? Is she aware how much losses... how much money we have lost because of her greed?’ He smiled mockingly and continued, ‘why would she care for that... she can now enjoy the view of the Himalayas from her apartment in Solan. To think... that she was under our roof... plotting against us... That lying piece of ...’

‘You got nothing.’ remarked Rishabh dismissively, ‘just shut up, would you?’

Arya gasped, his jaw dropped in indignation.

‘I will tell you everything if you just let me.’ Rishabh replied coldly. They stopped in front of a wooden bench. Rishabh surveyed the wet bench and decided to keep moving.

‘Jyoti wasn’t spying on Esha,’ said Rishabh softly, ‘she was spying on Pranav.’

Arya looked transfixed, he stared at his brother for a long moment but did not say anything. A few silent moments expired as they kept walking on the path around the house.

‘Four years ago there was a strike at the Solan plant of JK Cements, do you remember that?’ Rishabh paused looking for an answer. Arya pouted like a six-year-old and looked away, so Rishabh decided to continue with his narrative. ‘There was a conspiracy theory that an imposter had joined the Solan plant as a worker. He quickly made friends with the other workers and instigated them against the management. Then he covertly murdered the union leader and set the entire shanty town on fire. He convinced the workers that it was the management’s way to exact vengeance for protesting against them. The workers retaliated, they torched the factory, which was then shut

down for an indefinite period. This was until Esha bought that plant a year and a half ago.'

Arya walked alongside, his eyebrows twitched at a steeper angle as he looked up towards the tall *Banyan* tree, the top of which seemed to be covered completely by a cloud of fog. He produced a fake yawn.

Rishabh added, 'many people think that the imposter was Pranav.'

Arya felt his legs go numb and glanced towards his brother. 'That... that cannot be true,' he said, startled.

'It is a speculation. But... there seems to be a certain person who believes this story and he hired Jyoti to keep a watch on Pranav.' Rishabh was silent for a moment. 'Any guesses who that person might be?'

Arya had a sudden vision of Jyoti waiting outside the door listening in on the conversation between Pranav and Esha. He quickly tried to stitch the facts together. According to his brother, Jyoti was spying on Pranav - who by some mysterious way was the reason behind the closure of the Solan plant of JK Cements. Meanwhile, Jyoti was having suspiciously long conversations with the owner of JK Cements prior to arriving at Esha's door at five o'clock. At once Arya was sure who had recruited Jyoti to spy on Pranav.

'Mr. Dhruv... of course,' ventured Arya nonchalantly.

'Wow... You are absolutely correct.' Rishabh smiled, visibly impressed. 'Mr. Dhruv had already felt the ramifications of Pranav's scheme once and he was wary what Pranav might do to sabotage the merger deal between the two companies. That is why he recruited someone from the inside to spy on him. Mr. Dhruv had told Jyoti that Esha was expecting Pranav at five o'clock and she obediently stationed herself outside Esha's door.'

'So basically Jyoti was...,' said Arya unsurely, participating in the conversation after the sudden praise he received from his brother. '... she was on a mission to follow

Pranav like a ghost just to make sure he doesn't do anything rash.'

'Correct. You are getting sharper.'

Arya offered a sarcastic chuckle. 'Jyoti told you all this?'

'Yes, she did. The inspector's snake and badger story had gotten into her. She looked frightened and...'

At the turn, Pranav emerged through the fog - dressed in blue track suits with ear phones plugged to his ear. He waved, and the brothers responded with a smile and at once he went past them in a flash.

'Not a care in this world.' Arya remarked.

'Why would he care? He is now the director of Arora Cements.' Rishabh said gloomily, and out of nowhere the harsh reality of his sister's murder gripped him. *Esha was gone.*

'How can we be sure that Jyoti was successful in his mission?' asked Arya anxiously.

Rishabh stared at Arya, his eyes furrowed. 'What do you mean?'

Arya pressed, his tone firm. 'I mean Jyoti... she was outside the door at five, and Esha's body was discovered at five-thirty. All this time, Jyoti was in the kitchen... maybe there was a second attempt...'

Rishabh heaved a ponderous sigh. 'I don't know, there is so much happening around us I don't know what to think.' He turned back and eyed Pranav who took a turn and disappeared. 'Though...there is one thing I am sure about - the new director of the Arora Cements wears some dorky shoes.' Rishabh chuckled.

'Dorky?' Arya looked offended. 'You don't... Do you know anything about shoe - That's the ADIDAS c360 AIR LIGHT. That baby has everything, it is light, it is comfortable and it adapts itself to the shape of your foot. It is i-imported, you don't get these babies in India.'

'All right sir,' said Rishabh quickly, 'thank you for educating me. Can we talk about some things which are

more important than *shoes?*'

They arrived near a wooden bench, wiped off the dew with their hands and sat over it. There was no wind, yet Rishabh could feel the cold air in parts of his body which were fully covered. He pulled up the zipper of his jacket, making the characteristic crunching sound. It was time to apply his reasoning skills to decode the two instances of unaccounted money. Right from the moment, Jyoti had confessed owning a lavish house in Solan, Rishabh could see a metaphorical red light in front of his logical train of reasoning. She was wearing expensive jewellery, living a life much beyond her financial capacity – that might be the money Mr. Dhruv paid her. But what about the house? Surely Mr. Dhruv wouldn't get her a house for spying. Last night when Jyoti approached Rishabh for a confession, Rishabh had asked her whether she was involved in any other deal apart from the one of spying on Pranav. She had vehemently protested her involvement in the contract bids issue.

The second case was of Naina's car which was worth twice of what Rishabh himself drove. With the salary she received, it was impossible for her to afford such a luxurious car. The implication being that she might have discovered a way to get her hands on the contract bids submitted by Arora Cements, which she was then selling off to competitors at handsome prices. Suddenly, Naina's case started looking quite bleak. She was the last one to visit Esha's room and if she was indeed selling confidential information, there was sufficient reason for her to murder her and run away with the envelope that contained her name.

The silence was terminated by the thoughtful voice of Arya. 'It doesn't make sense to knock on Mr. Satish's door for an inquiry, does it?'

'We will need a confirmation.' Rishabh shook his head, wondering whether he had heard the question correctly. 'We

have other places to visit.'

'You mean the detective?' asked Arya cautiously. 'Are you still going to do that?'

'Why wouldn't I?' said Rishabh impatiently. 'There were two things missing from Esha's room. We have retrieved the sweater but the envelope is still missing. That guy knows what it contained, and it is highly possible that it bore the name of the murderer.'

'Yeah... the envelope you initially felt had pictures of Anubhav smooching some bimbo.' Arya glanced away trying to hide his frustration.

'The envelope was important. Arora Cements was losing one contract after another and Esha had sufficient reason to hire a professional. I am telling you, the murderer somehow figured this out, and murdered her before she could read it.'

'You were quite sure the last time as well,' commented Arya earnestly.

'I know I was wrong,' Rishabh said heatedly, 'it was just a setback... We got to take the hits, recalibrate our strategy and try again.'

'That I understand...' said Arya nervously, 'but why... why not let the inspector deal with the detective. Arya turned towards his brother, his wide misty eyes seeking an explanation.

'Because, while the inspector threatens the detective with his snake and badger story, the murderer will keep erasing the footprints I am trying to trace. I want the answer and I am ready to pay for it.' Rishabh snapped and jumped to his feet. 'Sometimes, to find the truth you got to embrace the chaos. I am in this and I wouldn't be done until I know who the murderer is'. He looked straight ahead for a moment and then looked down at Arya. 'If you are such a wuss, you can stay away from it.' Rishabh turned and left.

Arya saw his brother walk away. He felt uneasy, barely able to comprehend why his brother insisted on meeting the

detective at a secluded place when he could have easily taken the inspector's help. Love trumps reason, he thought.

No way Out

Chapter XX

Rishabh Arora's Honda Civic took a hard left near the Neugal café and then sped up on the Ghuggar-Neugal road. There were no street lights; stretches of the tea-estate flashed momentarily and then disappeared into oblivion as the car went by them. Two kilometers up the hilly road, he took a left and went down a *kutch*a road. The path ended perpendicular to a stream which emerged from a thick grove of pine trees. Fifty meters downstream, the stream twisted and turned behind the big boulders, and was lost into a dense forest.

Rishabh got out of the car and put on his jacket. He left the headlights on which crashed on the boulders on the other side of the stream giving it an uncanny appearance of a monster breathing fire from his eyes. The cold Himalayan breeze hit against his face making it red.

He could not help but feel the irony in the coincidence – Rishabh remembered that years ago, he and Esha had visited the Neugal Park for a school picnic. That day, a kid had stolen his super-hero action figure collection and Esha had chased him down. Today, Rishabh was standing on the other side of the park, waiting for a detective, who had information about the scoundrel who had deprived Arora Cements of its contracts and had probably snatched his beloved sister away from him. That day the pine trees on the mountain were crowned by the gentle rays of the sun... today they were covered with a thin white veil of moonlight.

The water in the stream gurgled past the boulders impatiently, as if in a hurry to reach the plains. Rishabh straightened his jacket and exhaled, a cloud of smoke forming in front of his face. He could suddenly feel the spark

of extraordinary possibility. In minutes, he would learn who was selling confidential information to the rivals in exchange of money. A knot tightened in his chest, he imagined what he would do once he knew the name. How would he react to it? It could be anybody - someone with whom he and the family members had dined with, shared jokes or even told secrets to. And how was this person rewarding them - by dragging the good name of Arora Cements through the mud. He felt a compulsion within him to know that person's name. He could give anything in exchange. Anything!

Rishabh checked his watch. Eight-ten. *Shouldn't he be here by now?*

Rishabh turned around. A small tea shop was illuminated by a solitary bulb. The shop was closed. A sign hanging from two rusty chains read - Karim's Fast Food. Rishabh did not know that Karim made most of his money selling alcohol and *charas* rather than tea.

Rishabh scanned his surroundings some more. There were rocks, trees and some more rocks. A dark shape on the other side of the stream drew his attention. It was too geometrical to be a rock and after careful observation, he knew it was the detective's small car. A few feet from that car, there was line of rocks carefully positioned on the stream, a human arrangement to crossover. *Now where did he go?*

A bump behind him made Rishabh turn. He saw nothing. The sign on the tea stall was shaking with the breeze. His mind wandered off to the news article he had read about a mountain lion which had attacked a shepherd. Normally these animals were found at a higher altitude and were common near Kullu. He personally had never heard about the presence of mountains lions in Palampur, but he had heard about something else... foxes. He felt a shiver.

A sudden movement caught his attention and Rishabh wheeled in the darkness. Out of nowhere, a vision appeared. Rishabh froze. An instant later, he felt a crushing blow to his

head. He fell backwards, crashed against the car and fell on the ground.

His scream echoed in the emptiness of the valley.

The inspector dashed across the living room, a new-found information making his blood boil. *No one keeps secrets from me.* Meera was standing by the kitchen, but there was no time for pleasantries. Two hours ago, he had got a call from the forensic department in Chandigarh. They had found a matching fingerprint. But, it did not make sense. *How is it possible?* He tried to focus, but the situation was getting more and more bizarre. The investigation itself had opened a can of worms. He decided to close out the concern raised by the brothers first and think about the fingerprints later. *Maybe this is somehow related to that.* With a scream of frustration, he started pounding at the door.

‘Police,’ he shouted. ‘Open the door right now.’

Naina opened the door. The inspector’s acrimonious scowl had no effect on her. But, the state of the room was completely different - It was in a state of complete mess; Clothes were scattered here and there. Plain sheets of paper were scrambled in every part of the room. There were snacks on the bed, the table and on the sofa. But, the room smelled of lavender and it was the only plus.

The inspector twitched as Naina ambled towards a chair and picked her clothes to make space for the inspector. ‘Sorry, the room is a bit dirty,’ she said apologetically.

The inspector looked too frustrated to be bothered. ‘I don’t care about the place Miss Naina., would you just sit somewhere.’

Naina picked all her clothes from the chair and moved towards her bed. Her speed was slower than the inspector’s

expectation. He slumped on the chair. 'Miss, are you aware about something called *obstruction of justice*?'

Naina did not reply at once, she took her time with the stack of clothes and then sat on the divan. 'Yes, I have heard about it.'

'So, you are not afraid of the law?' the inspector barked. Naina's expression remained unchanged. 'Why are you lying to me, Miss Naina?' asked the inspector intensely.

'I am not lying,' replied Naina curtly, folding her clothes.

'What? Did you just say you are not lying?' grinned the inspector maliciously. 'Great! So, riddle me this Miss Naina. You have been working for two years, your father works for a bank and you drive a car worth twenty-five lakhs. How is this possible madam? Is there a lottery you won that I am not aware of?'

'I have taken a loan.' Naina shrugged, her eyes down on her crumpled clothes.

There was a moment of silence.

'You're saying you have taken a loan to buy this car. Terrific,' smiled the inspector cunningly. 'So, if I look into your bank accounts, I should be seeing a debit entry every month against your loan. Isn't that correct, Miss accountant?'

Naina was now sputtering. 'Yes, you would.'

The inspector gave a triumphant smile. 'Miss Naina, you are a confident young woman.' He sounded apprehensive, almost like a father ready to share a life-lesson with his daughter. 'When I talk to you, I can feel it. I can see that you are not bragging or showing off - you have a kind of confidence that comes naturally. One can be that confident only when she has unconditional belief in her abilities. This world needs more women like you. But people who are blessed with self-belief need one more thing to become truly successful... admission of fault. Everybody makes mistakes, but only a few have the guts to accept them.'

Naina did not respond. The inspector could sense from the grim look on her face that his tactic of playing a good cop was working.

‘You know there is a strange thing about truth,’ said the inspector thoughtfully. ‘You cannot just bury the truth and run away. It is like a seed, one day it will pop out.’

Naina heaved a sigh and shook his head. ‘I am not lying, inspector.’

‘You have already lied to me about the car,’ said the inspector stiffly. I know this car was a gift from someone and I am aware who that person is. I can allow this thing to slide, but if you don’t give me the entire truth, very soon you will find yourself handcuffed inside my Jeep. You make up your mind, madam.’ He stood up and headed for the door.

Naina felt a sense of exhaustion within her as if she was tired of hiding the truth. Plaguing her thoughts was a simple fear, what effect will the truth have on the one she was trying to save?

‘Inspector,’ she called. ‘I have something to confess...’

Rishabh had never found himself at gunpoint until tonight. The gun into which he was staring was held by a man dressed completely in black, his face covered by a full face mask. Only his eyes were visible, it had a certain frightening quality. He stood in front of Rishabh like a hunter posing with his kill.

A scathing ice-cold heat ripped through his skull, as if someone had punctured hundred needles on his head. His vision was hazy and all he could hear was sound the water made as it crashed with the rocks.

‘Who are you?’ Rishabh’s voice was barely audible to him. ‘Where is the detective?’ There was no urgency in his voice as if it did not matter.

The reply came after a few moments. The voice was hoarse as if there was a fur-ball stuck in the assailant's throat. 'Who am I? I am the last person you will ever talk to.'

Rishabh rolled on the ground, the pain was becoming unbearable.

'Some people are just too smart. They don't understand that everything should not be dug up. Some facts should remain hidden. History gives us many examples, there are parts that were deliberately hidden until some intrepid explorer like you felt it was his responsibility to dig it up. You know what happened? Bloodbath. Thousands were killed and thousands were left homeless all because someone like you, who likes digging up stuff just because you think everybody should know what the truth is.' The assailant paused. 'You have done well, some of the conclusions you made were correct, like the one you made about the envelope. Just look where it got you.'

'And you think you will go unpunished?' Rishabh questioned, mustering as much defiance in his voice as he could. 'You will rot in hell, you are a coward, you son of a ...'

The sudden kick to his ribs, made him spit blood. Momentarily, he felt that the pain was disappearing, and in the next moment he felt a few more kicks on his shoulder blades, neck and stomach. He shielded his chest with his arms and looked up, his eyes narrowed to a slit. The skies above him looked dark, reddish and hazy. A kick landed on his face and the darkness was complete.

The inspector left Naina's room with delight on his face. The age-old trick of playing good-cop bad-cop had worked, and Naina had confessed the truth. The inspector gazed around absently in the living room, trying to find a moment to reflect about Naina's confession. He always had that suspicion but he needed more time to verify the facts

logically. What he heard could change the entire dynamics of the case. There was no doubt that Naina was a very smart woman, it could easily be a trick to hide a deeper truth. Was she giving up a pawn to save her queen?

At that moment, Meera emerged from the corridor and began straightening the pillows on the sofa.

Excited about his recent tactical triumph, the inspector felt like sharing it with someone. 'Meera,' he called excitedly. 'Can you call Rishabh? I need to talk to him.'

'He is not here.' Meera announced curtly.

Not here, the inspector mused, his eyes narrowed. 'Where is he?'

'He said he had to meet someone,' she said, fluffing the pillows. 'He went to that brook, behind Saurabh Van Bihar.'

'What?' the inspector winced. 'At this hour? Where is the other kid? Is he with him too?'

'Arya is in his room.' Jyoti answered, poking her head from the kitchen door. 'Do you want me to call him?'

The inspector turned and stared at Jyoti for one long moment and then hurried towards the door. 'There is no time for that.' He stormed out.

When Rishabh opened his eyes, the man was looking into his phone, fifteen yards ahead of him. The pain was exhausting and breathing seemed impossible. He felt something stuck in his throat, he spat out a mixture of dirt and blood. *I have to get up*, his mind kept telling him.

'You don't know how to stay down, do you?' The man chuckled, his eyes on Rishabh who was wriggling on the ground. 'I guess you need a little more beating.'

He walked leisurely towards Rishabh, who was now kneeling on the ground. With his head down and hands on his sides, he tried to push himself up. His body was trembling and his heavy breath was audible from a distance.

He just couldn't pull himself up, it felt as if his knees would burst into pieces.

The figure cut through the light coming from headlights of Rishabh's car.

Rishabh stared hopelessly and then glanced to his side. He felt his heart stop, a kind of gasp one feels in a moment of anticipation. A broken piece of glass was shining by his knees. The assailant was a few feet away from him.

Rishabh's face was contorted, his mouth open, sucking air.

The figure stopped in front of him and lifted his cheek with the index finger.

Then like a strike of lightening, Rishabh picked the shard of glass and his arm shot forward in a clockwise arc, tearing through the air and it penetrated the assailant's clothes, right beneath the collar bone. He roared in agony.

The figure recoiled a few steps, but then he lunged forward in pain and fury, ramming his knees into Rishabh's face. He turned and watched Rishabh collapse on the ground.

'Bitch!' The figure yelled. 'I just wanted to warn you... but now I think I have to kill you.'

Rishabh watched as the gun barrel swung in his direction.

Echoes erupted in Rishabh's mind like peals of thunder. Helplessness settled in his veins. He wanted to stand up and fight but his body was unresponsive. The pain jolted him, and the feeling that he had failed his sister seeped into his conscience. He had a list of suspects, but there was no definitive clue against anyone. This was his last chance, but now it was gone too. Feeling a surge of hatred building inside him, he looked up. The assailant was breathing heavily; his jacket was torn and a thick red line appeared beneath the left collar bone.

At that moment, the one-tone police hooter tore through the silence of the valley like a knife. The assailant, looked up

towards the road on the hill. A police Jeep with a red beacon on it was approaching speedily. There was no time to waste. The assailant immediately ran towards his car stationed on the other side of the stream, leaving Rishabh lying on the ground.

But then Rishabh noticed something, he stared at it with absolute incredulity. It was difficult to open his left eye which was swollen shut, but he tried to focus. The man was about to cross Rishabh's car. He was still looking at it, his right eye bulging out with disbelief. Of course, he was thinking of it all the while, but

He saw it once again as the lights from his car's headlights crashed against it. And, then he was entirely sure... the assailant, was wearing an ADIDAS c360 AIR LIGHT. He disappeared into the darkness.

The police Jeep roared down the *kutcha* road like a fighter jet getting ready to land. The car swerved as the inspector pressed on the brakes. He slammed on his walkie-talkie and it burst to life. He picked it up and yelled at it. 'Suspect, in a small green car, moving towards Saurabh Van Bihar. I repeat suspect is in a small green car.' At once the inspector dropped his walkie-talkie on his seat and jumped out of his Jeep. Rishabh was writhing in pain.

'Have you totally lost it?' The inspector demanded. 'Let me take a look.'

Blood oozed out of Rishabh's head.

'Sir... I know... who the' Rishabh said, his voice breaking.

Inspector said nothing. He picked Rishabh in his arms and carried him to his Jeep. Having him cramped in the front seat, the inspector circled the Jeep and occupied the driver seat. His eyes were filled with rage. 'I need an explanation for this. How can you be so stupid?'

The engine came to life, the Jeep moved in reverse gear.

Rishabh took in heavy breaths intermittently. He turned towards the inspector and said, his voice like stone. 'Sir, I

know who the murderer is.'

The Jeep crashed with a small boulder.

Meeting on the Porch

Chapter XXI

‘Great! I see that everybody is here...’ The inspector smiled like a magician ready to take a bunny out of his hat. He looked around, at the anxious faces. Ten chairs were arranged in a rectangular fashion, four each on the longer side and one each on the shorter. Jyoti seemed particularly disturbed, uncomfortably moving on her seat and glancing here and there in a shifty manner. Naina absently stroked her hair backwards, and then redid it once again. Rishabh sat directly opposite to the inspector on the shorter side. With his legs crossed, he stared at the inspector with a steady look as if waiting for a train at a railway station. The sub-inspector was still adjusting his heavy frame on a small plastic chair behind the inspector, outside the rectangular arrangement.

It was almost noon, the sunlight escaped through the fluttering leaves, dancing on the porch of the Arora Mansion. The inspector shuffled through his notes and then read from it in an important manner. ‘Miss Naina, Mr. Pranav, Mr. Anubhav, Meera, Jyoti, Miss Rashmi and Mr. Dhruv...’ As the inspector called the names, a wave of anguish passed over the faces of those whose name was called out.

‘What is this?’ Mr. Dhruv barked.

‘These are the prime suspects of the murder, Mr. Dhruv.’ The inspector said, looking very seriously over the top of his glasses.

‘What?’ Meera cried, almost like a wounded dog. She sprang up on her feet. ‘I will not sit here and listen to...’

‘No one is going anywhere,’ the inspector shouted. ‘Not before I handcuff the murderer and drag him to my van. The inspector pursed his lips, his face red like a volcano ready to

erupt. Mystified by the sudden outburst of anger, Meera nervously sat down on her chair. The inspector pushed the rim of his spectacles up and looked around, 'Is that clear?'

There was no reply.

'Before we get started,' the inspector said, his voice still loud. 'We must understand why we are assembled here and what we intend to achieve. The bottom line is that today I am going to arrest someone. And that someone is sitting amongst us.' He paused. 'You might ask whether I have enough evidence. To that I will say, yes I do. I have sufficient evidence to make an arrest.'

The hair on Anubhav's neck prickled when the inspector's eyes landed on him temporarily. Pranav put up a long face like a caged tiger in a zoo.

'There are a few things that need an explanation,' the inspector continued. First is the mystery of the blue envelope. Miss Esha felt that someone in her inner-circle was selling confidential information to her rival cement companies. So, she had hired a professional to help her out. We have reasons to believe that the blue envelope contained proof against the person responsible for the huge losses incurred by Arora Cements.'

'Yesterday night, a small shop in Palampur *bazaar* was set on fire. The shop sold surveillance equipment. The owner apparently provided detective services. We have proof that Miss Esha had visited this shop, and paid the owner to investigate the possibility of information leakage in the company. Now the detective is missing... This is a strong indication that someone did not want us to get hold of him. It is quite clear that the envelope is *somehow* connected to this murder.'

The inspector paused and looked around at the confused faces. The winds crashed against the pine trees outside the campus making a moaning sound.

'Second, is about Esha's sweater,' the inspector declared. 'How did her sweater end up in Anubhav's room?'

Was someone trying to frame him or did Esha drop it there? And coming to the most confusing piece. Why was Esha running around Rashmi's and Anubhav's rooms?'

The inspector heaved a ponderous sigh. 'Though I have the evidence to make an arrest, I don't have all the answers. But, someone amongst you does.' The inspector leaned forward, and looked over the rim of spectacles. The sunlight fell directly on his head making the scalp visible where the hair had thinned. 'Rishabh and Arya have done a good bit of investigation behind my back. They have found the answers to these questions. It was very risky but they did it anyway. Don't be mistaken,' the inspector eyed Rishabh, and extended his index finger. 'I am very angry. You both did not find it necessary to consult me and went on with your plans. It was totally outrageous, and after this missing detective incident, I wouldn't be too wrong to say that you both are very lucky to be alive.' Rishabh nodded calmly matching the inspector's gaze. The inspector lowered his finger. 'But, that is how you react when someone harms your loved one.'

'Rishabh has organized the clues in a way that summarizes the events of that dreadful evening. His reasoning points towards the same person my evidence does.' The inspector leaned back on his chair and held out his hand towards Rishabh. 'Let's get down to business, shall we?'

All the eyes shifted towards Rishabh, who looked up, took a deep breath and adjusted the arm-sling which propped up his fractured left hand. His face was pale with dark black spots near his eyebrows. There was a visible cut on his lips. White mesh bandage covered his entire head leaving a small portion of hair visible in the centre.

'Before I...' The words were not clear. Rishabh cleared his throat and restarted: 'Before I walk you through the events of Saturday evening, there is something I have learnt from the inspector and I would like to share that with you. Naina

and Pranav have declared their love for each other. They plan to marry soon.'

'What...' Meera gaped. 'What are you talking about.' She turned towards Pranav immediately, her eyes seeking an explanation.

That very moment Naina slid her arm through Pranav's, answering all the curious eyes at once.

Meera gave a stiff nod and rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by Rashmi. 'I am very happy for you, brother.'

Meera scowled. 'I am happy too. But what's with the secrecy...'

'There is no secret.' Pranav replied, his voice calm. 'We just wanted to see how it goes before making a decision. We did not want to rush into things. But, now the time is right. This woman,' he turned towards Naina and took her hand, 'is exactly what anyone wants in a wife.'

'I think I have spent enough time talking about this with Naina,' the inspector interrupted swiftly, and turned towards Meera who was almost ready with her next comment. 'We will have enough time to talk about this later. We must stick to our agenda now. No one interrupts Rishabh while he speaks. I don't have the whole day.'

Meera hung her face like a scolded puppy.

Rishabh started at once, this time his voice filled with conviction. 'Let me take you on the same path I walked myself to make the discovery. I will tell you about the obstacles I faced and how I went about them. I will then correlate the evidence collected by the inspector to the facts, and I assure you that by the time I finish we all will have the murderer's name on our lips.'

'Let us first talk about the things we already know,' Rishabh said. 'Firstly, the time of murder. Esha was murdered much before 5.10 PM.'

Meera looked at Jyoti, slightly puzzled by the remark. She tried to control herself but burst out eventually. 'Naina

was with Esha till 5.10.' She looked towards Naina seeking a confirmation.

Rishabh gave a faint smile. 'She lied, Meera.'

'How is that possible, I saw her coming out of the study at 5.10.'

'Had you seen her go in?'

Meera stared at Rishabh as if she was seeing her for the first time.

Mr. Dhruv did not seem impressed. 'Why would she lie?' He protested.

'She lied, because Pranav had asked her to.' Rishabh paused allowing the fact to settle. Meera was almost vibrating at her seat eager to interrupt.

'There are two possibilities. Let us explore the first.' Rishabh said, sounding like a priest. 'At two minutes past five, Pranav walks into Esha's room and finds her dead. Seeing this, he panics and calls Naina on her phone and asks her to help him. She agrees. Minutes later, she goes into the study room and waits there. At 5.10, she stands by the door of the study room, and asks Meera about the television serial she was watching. Then she goes to Pranav's room. The illusion is complete. Thereafter it was easy. She told the inspector that she had a brief meeting with Esha from 5.05 to 5.10 and Meera confirmed it. This is the first possibility.'

There was dead silence.

'Everything seemed perfect, but I was held up by two things. Meera mentioned that Naina had been here several times, but she never talked to her. So, when she initiated a conversation with Meera, she found it awkward. She told this to the inspector and this was my first clue. Next, we found out that the car she drove was a very expensive model, something her salary wouldn't permit. I asked the inspector to inquire about it. As it turns out, the car was a gift from Pranav. This re-confirmed that something fishy was going on.'

Meera looked furious. She was trying hard to keep her eyes away from Naina.

‘But, there is another possibility.’ Rishabh looked around expecting a comment. When he did not get any, he continued: ‘The other possibility is... When Pranav stepped into Esha’s room, she was alive... and *he* murdered her.’

Pranav’s voice rose abruptly. ‘Are you calling me a murderer, you scoundrel...’ Pranav’s teeth clenched with rage.

The inspector interrupted swiftly. ‘Mr. Pranav, please calm down. He is just laying down the possibilities.’

‘As I was saying,’ Rishabh restarted, his eyes towards Pranav, as if challenging him to step up and fight if he has the guts. ‘The other possibility is that Pranav entered the room at 5.02, murdered Esha and asked Naina for help. But, Jyoti was standing just outside the door when Pranav went in.’ Rishabh quickly summarized Jyoti’s involvement in the entire thing and how she had been working as a spy for Mr. Dhruv who denied all accusations immediately. The inspector had to interrupt to stop Mr. Dhruv from cursing Rishabh.

When Mr. Dhruv took a break from his vulgarism, Rishabh continued: ‘With Jyoti stationed outside the door, it seems highly illogical for a person of Pranav’s mental acumen to take such a huge risk. But had he taken that risk anyway, it becomes impertinent for him to push the time of murder. That is where Naina’s involvement comes into the picture. To sum up, I wasn’t sure, what really happened in Esha’s room at 5.02 PM.’

Mr. Dhruv whispered something. It wasn’t audible.

Rishabh went on with his story. ‘However, there was one piece that did not fit the puzzle. During the board meeting, Esha had asked Pranav to come to her room once he was done analysing the financial numbers. During the interrogation, Pranav told the inspector and I quote, “I was done by five, and I went to her room to give her the

figures.” This was a lie because the next morning, when I asked him for the same numbers, he told me that they weren’t ready. The big question here is why did Pranav lie about such a small thing? I got the answer yesterday, when I went to meet the detective near the brook. Pranav had lied because he had a different motive altogether. It was imperative for him to go into Esha’s room regardless of whether he had completed the task she had assigned him to do.’

Pranav’s eyes narrowed to a slit as it settled on Rishabh in an unblinking fashion. His lips trembled. He spoke something through his gritted teeth. No one heard it, but it was safe to assume that it was a loathsome abuse.

Rishabh ignored that. ‘Pranav went to her room, because he could not allow Esha to read the content of the envelope.’

Pranav had reached the end of his patience. ‘You son of’ He sprang to his feet. Naina tried to hold his hand. The inspector alarmed by Pranav’s movement to his left, rose immediately, and formed a human barricade in front of him.

‘Mr. Pranav, get a grip on yourself.’

‘This is utter non-sense. I have nothing to do with the envelope and I did not murder Esha. I went in because I just wanted to convince her not to sell the company.’ Pranav shouted.

‘Mr. Pranav, please take your seat. Rishabh is not making any arrests, I will be doing that. Can we just sit down and listen for a while?’ Pranav sat down reluctantly. The sub-inspector rose and positioned his chair behind Pranav.

Rishabh went on to explain how he had incorrectly guessed the reason for involvement of a detective and still luckily reached the place he got most of his answers from. He also briefed them about the previous night when he had gone to meet the detective and was instead attacked by a masked assailant who was wearing the same rare variety of imported shoes which Pranav had.

Pranav turned towards the inspector, his voice pleading. 'Believe me inspector, this is a setup. I don't know why but he is trying to frame me. Moreover, yesterday night, I was in my room the entire time.'

'Is there somebody who can testify that?'

'Yes, once you were done with your interrogation, Naina had come to my room.'

'I see.' The inspector heaved an ominous sigh. There was no way he was going to believe Naina's testimony. He had been fooled once and that was enough. The inspector turned towards Rishabh and said, 'Mr. Pranav, let us talk about this later.'

Rishabh had a smug look on his face. He continued: 'Owing to Pranav's smartness, I gave the benefit of doubt to him. I assumed that when he stepped inside the room, Esha was already dead. Of course, he pocketed the envelope.'

Pranav looked as if he would have shot Rishabh, if there were a revolver nearby.

The wind was getting colder. Broken leaves flew inside the porch. Rishabh took a deep breath. 'Now that we know what happened to the envelope, let us switch our attention to Esha's black sweater. For this we need to revisit Anubhav's story. It was about a minute or two before five. Anubhav was sitting in the living room watching TV, and he saw Esha going to Rashmi's room. She was wearing her black sweater. Anubhav followed her into Rashmi's room. Esha wasn't there, she had used the series of back doors and had gone back to her room. At the stroke of five, Anubhav was still in Rashmi's room looking for Esha. It would have taken him at least a minute to reach Esha's room via the channel of back doors. Now this gives Anubhav a window of a minute before Pranav walked into her room.'

The sub-inspector sat upright in his chair. His eyes sparkled.

'You might think what motive does Anubhav have. Yes, they were having relationship trouble, but at the end of the

day they were planning to elope.'

Meera sighed and shook her head. Everybody else just swallowed this news.

'Even for a moment, if I consider Anubhav murdering Esha,' Rishabh said, giving Anubhav a piercing look, 'Why would he carry her sweater back to his room? That is totally impractical. So, I explored another alternative. We assumed that when Pranav entered Esha's room, she was dead already. Instead of calling for help, Pranav panicked and designed a way out of it. Maybe this was the case with Anubhav as well. He walked in from her back door, saw her dead, panicked and ran away.'

Anubhav's expression did not change. His eyes did not blink, as if he was lost somewhere else. Naina narrowed her eyes, looking interested in the argument.

'Meera was pretty confident that she had seen Naina go to Esha's room. In reality, she was hiding behind the study door. One small question about the TV serial, and Meera was confident Naina was coming from Esha's room. *Illusion*. Her back was towards the door and her mind was focused on the television. Anubhav was sitting at the same spot watching television, and I asked myself...' There was a pause and Jyoti could feel her heart pounding in her throat. Rishabh felt a rising air of anticipation. He whispered the next few words. 'Could it be possible that he never saw Esha?'

For a moment, the sub-inspector was taken aback. He protested immediately. 'What are you talking about? Anubhav saw her black Cornell sweater.'

'The illusionists are the most honest of people, sub-inspector. They promise one thing - *Deception*, and they deliver every time. Anubhav saw Esha's sweater. True. But did he see Esha?'

Anubhav did not offer a reply. He stroked his hair nervously, probing his memory for a glimpse of Esha's face. There was a tense silence.

Rishabh drew a short breath. 'Gathering from Anubhav's reaction, it is safe to assume that he had not seen Esha's face. All he had seen was her sweater.'

Anubhav's face had turned red and he was tapping his knuckles on the armrest. He opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Rishabh. 'No need to press your brain for an answer Anubhav. At a minute to five, there was no way you could have seen Esha running on the corridor.' Rishabh paused. The silence was longer, more intense than before. Finally, he said. 'Esha was already murdered by then...'

The porch of the Arora mansion reverberated with the words. Anubhav shot an uncanny glance at Rishabh, as if he had just issued his death sentence. There was a little burst from Jyoti as she covered her mouth with her *saree*. The inspector had an ugly, twisted look on his face. He muttered under his breath. *Paah...*

'Anubhav, if you can please confess the truth, I can go ahead and reveal the name of the murderer.' Rishabh said calmly.

Self-pity had been a part of Anubhav's life since Esha had left him in Barcelona. Tears welled up in his eyes and he knew he had no choice but to let it flow. 'Yes... Yes... Yes...' He burst out. 'She was lying on the floor when I reached her room. I checked for a pulse but it was too late. I did not know what to do, so I ran away. I am such a coward... A big coward...' Anubhav let out a wail like a wounded dog.

'Thank you, Anubhav.' There was a satisfied smile on Rishabh's face. 'This leaves us with only piece, and this puzzle will be complete. We have a few good leads. Someone was in Esha's room, and this person murdered her and escaped with her sweater. The illusion was compelling, so we can assume this person had almost similar physical characteristics as Esha. Probably, this person had flowing black hair, or perhaps a wig. Let me add, that the inspector

had found this person's fingerprints on Esha's belt and her necklace. Let's try to figure out who this person might be.'

The sub-inspector cringed. He felt as if he was sitting on an oven.

'Anubhav was watching TV and he would have spotted someone going in from this direction. No one did, so the murderer must have entered from the back door. The murderer escaped with Esha's sweater, and was spotted by Anubhav at 4.58. It means that the time of murder would be prior to that. Let us see who was where at that time. I was outside with Arya, completing the rounds. Anubhav was watching television in the living room. Meera was in the kitchen. Pranav and Naina were in their respective rooms. Jyoti was with Mr. Dhruv scheming a plot to keep Pranav under check, unaware that Esha was already dead by then...'

It took some time for the sub-inspector to comprehend the name missing from this list. By the time he did, all the heads had turned in on direction.

'Yes, you all are correct.' Rishabh gave a triumphant smile. 'The only person who was outside at that time and had no alibi whatsoever, is the murderer. *Rashmi*.'

The entire Truth

Chapter XXII

The inspector sat on the porch of the Arora Mansion rubbing his temples. The chaos in his mind drowned the sighs of exasperation around him. He had always been proud of his analytical abilities but today, even after having sufficient evidence against Rashmi, he wasn't quite sure. The use of Esha's sweater was a perfect deception. Using that, Rashmi had killed two birds with one stone. It convinced Anubhav that Esha was alive, thereby acquitting herself from the crime. And then she dropped the sweater in Anubhav's room - framing the person she had always despised.

But why did she murder Esha?

Questions were exploding inside his head like fireworks. Rashmi and Pranav had always been close. When it came down to business, she had always done what her brother had asked her to do. Perhaps, she was aware of Pranav's wrongdoings, and *perhaps*, she was also aware what the envelope contained. Did Rashmi murder Esha to save Pranav? The reasoning seemed too far-fetched for the inspector's liking.

Did she do it out of love for her ancestral business? Did she take matters in her hand when she felt that Pranav would not be able to stop Esha from selling Arora Cements? Owing to the evidence and shortage of other reasons, the inspector considered this for a while.

There was a tense silence as time seemed to have stopped moving. Everyone was expecting an outburst of emotion from Rashmi, something equivalent to remorse or fear. Her face however revealed nothing. Her present expression was completely different from her usual one.

Normally, she moved around the house with contempt on her face, as if she was readying herself to smack a bottle on someone's head. Presently, she was sitting with her head down absorbing all the negativity around her.

Her silence to all the accusations spoke more about her involvement in the crime than Risabh's words ever did. She seemed distant. The inspector could almost sense the pain of loss on her face but it could have easily been guilt. He let this feeling pass and studied the bewilderment on the faces surrounding him who were paralyzed by Rishabh's version of truth.

Finally, Rashmi broke the silence.

'Esha was tired,' she said slowly, her voice trembling. 'She was never at peace. Of course, we did not offer her any. During her childhood, Pranav and I took every opportunity to make her realize that she was an orphan - that she was not related to us in any way. Naturally, when she grew up, she built an imaginary wall around herself. Her friendships were superficial and she was too scared to open herself up to anybody. But then something happened.' Rashmi raised her head and eyed Anubhav.

'This boy showed up,' Rashmi said dramatically, 'with his silky long hair and his masculine charm. He gave her the attention she had missed throughout her life. And for once, she put her guard down and tried to feel free in the company of another human being. And what did this person do?' she asked breathlessly, her bulging red eyes fixed on Anubhav. 'This guy groped her. He was in such a hurry to feel her up, he did not even care for her consent.'

Anubhav drew a soft breath as if the words had physically injured him.

'She was looking for companionship, and this animal was trying to satiate his base desires. She didn't feel anything physically, but emotionally, the old wounds started bleeding again. The exhaustion from the years of solitude seemed better than the betrayal by the one person she had decided

to trust.’ Rashmi seethed, pausing for a moment. ‘There were a lot of emotions she hadn’t processed, and she didn’t know how to deal with them. She would spend her days sitting in a dark room, weeping about how unfair life had been to her. She wanted to run away from Barcelona, but she couldn’t return here. So, she played the post-graduation card and went to the United States and rebuilt the wall around her. Two years later when she returned here, she kept herself occupied in company work. Contracts and Invoices became her friends and one after the other, she managed the capacity expansion project and the acquisition of JK Cements’ plant at Solan. She was stretching the limits at work, hoping those unprocessed emotions would go away.’

Mr. Dhruv surveyed Pranav with mounting dislike.

‘But they didn’t. Soon she realized that she didn’t have the strength left within her to suffer anymore. She went to Paris looking for a shoulder to cry on and she chose Anubhav – the person who was responsible to put her in that state. She ended up asking him to come work here.’

The slanting rays of the winter sun brightened her face as a long moment of silence expired.

‘It was during a cultural festival at our plant,’ continued Rashmi slowly, her expression softening, ‘I saw a spark in Esha’s eyes. Her velvety eyelashes couldn’t hide the twinkle in her eyes. And it did not stop there. In the following four or five weeks, there were instances I caught her stealing a glance, and every time she acted as if it wasn’t a big deal. A month or two later, I understood what even she hadn’t figured out herself.’ Rashmi paused trying to control the echo in her heart, growing louder every second. Everyone could hear the slow intake of her breath. ‘She was in love.’ The next few words were barely a whisper. ‘She was in love with *me*.’

Meera grunted. ‘What the hell are you speaking. Have you completely lost yourself? It is sacrilege,’ she yelled,

almost ready to pounce on Rashmi. She then turned towards the others. 'Are you all going to sit and listen to her?'

'This is the truth Meera.' Rashmi's dark eyes welled with tears.

'Let us give her a chance to speak,' said the inspector coldly, dismissing Meera's attempt to speak again.

Meera was incensed, she turned towards Rishabh for support who looked away immediately. He could feel his hair stand up on his arms. Rashmi's version of the truth had hit him harder than the fact that the validity of his hypothesis was under scrutiny. *Esha wanted to run away with Rashmi?*

'Esha gave me this,' said Rashmi sincerely, pointing at her rhodium-plated bracelet. Five shiny crystals sparkled brilliantly in the afternoon sun. Jyoti planted her feet on the ground and raised herself slightly to look at Rashmi's wrist. She gave a stiff nod, satisfied by the quality of the sparkling stones. Rashmi managed a feeble smile and said, 'you should have seen her face. She was so frightened; her cheeks were glowing like a cherry tomato.' Tears rolled down her eyes. 'That is what I used to call her. *Cherry*. We had an unspoken understanding... some sort of a strange connection.'

'I don't understand,' remarked the inspector awkwardly, sitting with his elbows on his knees, head bowed and palms against his forehead. 'Why haven't you told anyone about this?'

Rashmi shot him a piercing look. For a moment, the inspector wished he hadn't asked the question.

'You think I enjoyed keeping this a secret? Rashmi replied sharply. 'Do you think, I loved this life of constant pain and emotional fatigue? Yes... I had to hide the truth, I suffered with every breath, always reminding myself that I was not who I was pretending to be, feeling a constant scratch inside me to let go. Anything is better than that feeling inspector, anything... even death. I knew the truth would hurt many... so, I chose... Silence.' She smiled softly,

a kind of smile you have on your face when your efforts don't take you to places you had hoped for. Nothing burns more than quashed hope.

'Do you know when was the last time I felt normal?' Rashmi asked desperately as the inspector gasped trying to find an answer to the rhetorical question. 'I will tell you... It was when I was in kindergarten. I was living my life, the truest and purest form of me. There was no influence, no prejudice and no pressure. I was free to be whoever I felt I was. I knew I was different, I always knew that but it was difficult to describe in words. With time, the society made me feel guilty for something I had no control upon. I wanted to feel normal again, I wanted to be accepted by the society, so I covered the truth with layers and layers of lies. But I was ready to give it up for our love... but Esha wouldn't accept it.'

Uneasiness was visible on the faces of those seated in the porch. Even Mr. Dhruv seemed calmer and concerned.

'She chose to live in denial.' Rashmi gazed blankly at the floor, her voice still trembling. 'Anubhav had announced his love for Esha, but his feelings did not resonate within her. She blamed herself and her difficult childhood for the absence of emotions within her. Running back to Anubhav in Paris was a compulsion. She wanted to try again and prove that she wasn't different. But nothing happened within her. The feelings just didn't dissolve, they swirled around like sand particles in a glass of water. She blamed it on time and distance. She asked Anubhav to come to India, sub-consciously believing, that with time those missing feelings will build-up within her. She kept chasing an illusion, placing a lid on her real emotions, just because she wanted to feel normal. She took cover in her work, not ready to accept that she was different... wonderfully different... just like me. Whenever, she came close, I could feel the warmth, the kind you feel on a beautiful spring day, refreshing both the body and the spirit.'

Meera grunted again, as if she was going to puke.

‘This is what she was afraid of,’ Rashmi yelled fiercely, holding her hand out towards Meera. ‘In a country, where children are afraid to talk about their desire to choose a subject of their choice for high school, coming out of the closet is a big thing. There were a handful people Esha had a good relationship with, and she did not want to spoil that. You don’t know how difficult it is, inspector... Once, just to test the waters, I had told my best friend of six years about my sexual orientation. Do you know what happened? At first she said, it is okay, I support you no matter what - and then two days later she walked past me like I didn’t exist.’ Wrinkles appeared on Rashmi’s forehead as she paused, reliving the pain she had once felt. ‘Then there was the nature of our relationship. Everybody thinks we are related to each other, but we are not. We are not related by birth. I know it was wrong but I have never considered her a part of this family, until of course we ...’

The inspector kept his head down soaking all the information.

‘The last few days, she had been behaving very strangely,’ Rashmi continued feebly, ‘as if she was exhausted from the weight she was carrying around, the weight of the truth, buried deep inside her. She wasn’t devoid of energy; she just couldn’t use it anymore. The business was not doing well, and she felt someone within her inner circle was conspiring against her. I was partly responsible for her state too, I pushed her to tell Anubhav about her choices and where exactly her heart was. I told her that she couldn’t outrun herself forever and she must accept it as soon as possible. But she did not and I snapped. I threatened to end it with her. Finally, on Friday evening, in the Bailey’s disc, she told Anubhav what she should have told him years ago.’ She turned towards Anubhav, anguish visible on his face.

The inspector subsequently glanced at the sub-inspector. At once, both realized the reason for the fight between Anubhav and Esha.

Rashmi continued: 'Saturday evening, I went to Esha's room through the back door. It was about 4:40 then. I stepped in and at once she confessed that she had already told everything to Anubhav. I knew it couldn't have been easy for her and nor for Anubhav. Not seeing your love reciprocate is one of the toughest things to handle, and I know that because I had felt the same way when Esha wasn't ready to accept me. It felt like someone had taken a knife and punctured my heart.'

'Esha had kept him hanging for a long time, and when you are around the person you love, you hope that things would change. Sometimes, you can see the full stop to your story, but your heart convinces you that it is only a comma, and you try harder hoping things would change. That evening in Bailey's disc when Esha confessed about her orientation, Anubhav's hopes were crushed, and his immediate reaction was well documented by the press.'

'Saturday evening, when I saw Anubhav exiting Esha's room with that worried look on his face, I was sure it was him.' Rashmi dabbed her forehead and leaned against the chair. 'That is why I dropped Esha's sweater in Anubhav's room. I wanted to make sure, he is incriminated.'

The inspector shifted his weight on the chair still looking down, talking to his lap. 'Is it okay to conclude that you wore Esha's sweater to create an illusion, so that your relationship remains a secret? You just wanted people to keep thinking that you two never interacted with each other?'

Rashmi nodded. 'It wasn't me. Esha wanted our relationship to stay a secret. *She* asked me to wear her sweater. *She* told me to use the front door because Rishabh and Arya were jogging outside.'

‘Do you want to say something, Mr. Anubhav?’ asked the inspector composedly, his eyes still down. ‘It would seem that the validity of Miss Rashmi’s story depends totally on your statement.’

Anubhav replied after a few moments, his voice trembled with pain. ‘I had cried an ocean. But, it wasn’t deep enough for her boat to sail back to me.’ He smiled stoically, ‘Esha did not choose me. She chose Rashmi.’

The inspector arched his eyebrows and looked up. ‘Basically, you were lying about your plans to elope with Esha?’ he snarled.

‘Yes, I was lying,’ protested Anubhav desperately. ‘What was I supposed to do? The sweater was discovered in my room and Rashmi had seen me exiting from Esha’s room. I just wanted to save myself, so when you told me that Meera had overheard Esha’s plan to elope, I had no other option but to accept. I had... no other option...’

In the silence that followed, Rishabh gazed hopelessly, fully aware that his theory had been disproved.

‘I have another proof,’ said Arya suddenly, as he pulled out an A4 sheet from his shirt pocket. He held it out to the inspector. ‘Esha had booked a one-way ticket for Ba-Barcelona for t-two. The other passenger was s-supposed to be Rashmi.’

Rashmi glanced up. ‘Yes, Esha had bought a property there. We were planning to settle in Barcelona.’

Meera rolled her eyes and looked at Pranav who stared back in disbelief.

Arya had been analysing every point till this moment. The facts were overwhelming but a few unanswered questions formed dark spots in empty corners of his mind. He closed his eyes and suddenly a door opened slightly in his mind. He could see sunlight burst into those dark corners, sweeping away the darkness. Cold winds bounced against his face. He held his breath and said, ‘I think... I-I know who the murderer is.’ For a moment, the words hung

in the silence. Arya could feel his body shake, as if his entire body was reverberating with the truth... The *entire* truth.

The master Mind

Chapter XXIII

Inspector Rashid was sweating profusely in the openness of the porch. He dabbed his forehead with a white handkerchief, stared blankly towards Rishabh and then towards the floor. All the while, his thoughts zoomed around in the empty confines of his head like a loose, untied balloon. Few minutes back, he was convinced that Rashmi had murdered Esha, but now he had learnt the most unexpected thing - Esha was in love with Rashmi, and she was planning to elope with her and not Anubhav. Moreover, Esha was alive when Rashmi left her room, but when Anubhav entered Esha's room through the back door, she was dead. The mystery lay in that gap... What happened in that small interval? *Think Dammit! Think!*

Meanwhile, Arya glanced around in a shifty manner, his dark eyes glistening with the light of the new-found explanation of the murder. He looked over at the confused faces, people who were already exhausted with the sheer amount of discoveries made. He wasn't feeling too good either, a big ball of anxiety was bubbling inside him but he took a deep breath and said:

'I... I had figured out who the murderer is long back... but I-I w-was held up by one point.' His voice broke a little. 'Thanks to my brother, I have figured out that s-small bit. Rishabh provided a superb description of the events. But... But, he did not provide an explanation for the two things which are as crucial as the envelope and Esha's missing s-sweater. One, the footmarks in my room, and t-two the rusty latch on my backdoor which was out of position.' Arya swallowed. 'I will try to integrate them into my story...and ... and give you the *entire* t-truth.'

Rishabh stared blankly at Arya, surprised that his brother had it in him to speak up in front of so many people. Arya swallowed once again and continued:

‘We now know that Rashmi did not murder Esha. A minute or two before five, when she left Esha’s room, she was still alive. Taking into consideration both my brother’s narrative and A-Anubhav’s confession, a minute after five when Anubhav stepped into Esha’s room from the back door, s-she was dead. If we can somehow account for those two or three minutes, w-we can figure out who the murderer is.’

The inspector had half a desire to stop this stammering kid and allow himself more time to think. But, Arya had already started speaking, slightly more confident than before.

‘According to Jyoti’s confession, Mr. Dhruv had asked her to keep an eye on Pranav. At the stroke of five, she left Mr. Dhruv’s room and went to the study. She had a small window to go into Esha’s room, strike her down with something heavy and then choke her. But, why would she go against the wishes of Mr. Dhruv, who had recruited her to protect Esha in the first place? It does not make sense and we will rule that out.’

Jyoti’s bulging eyes narrowed as she exhaled, relief visible on her face.

‘Now we need account for a minute or so, before five o’ clock.’ The intensity in Arya’s voiced increased. ‘The back door of Esha’s room was still open when Rashmi left her room.’ Arya closed his eyes as if visualizing the situation. ‘Someone enters the room, hits her with a brick and then throws it outside. But the work is not complete, Esha was still alive. This person takes a pillow and chokes her. Now our murderer must escape, but Rashmi is exiting through the back door in the adjacent room. There is a risk of being spotted, so the murderer must choose an alternative. We

both were guarding the entrance door and the only way out was through the back door of my room.'

The sub-inspector wasn't impressed by the reasoning. He arched his eyebrows and said, 'why would the murderer be so interested in leaving the house? Had I murdered someone, I would have preferred to hide somewhere inside.'

Arya smiled nervously. He suddenly looked very uneasy. 'That... That is a very good question. *Why* was this person so eager to leave the house? *Why* not stay inside? The answer is, someone was expecting this person outside.' Arya turned towards the inspector. 'Sir, can you tell me who was where at four-fifty-nine?'

The inspector was taken aback by the sudden question. He began slowly, 'Well... Meera was in the kitchen, Naina and Pranav were in their respective rooms, Rashmi and Anubhav were busy playing hide and seek, Jyoti and Mr. Dhruv were strategizing their move and ...'

Arya interrupted the inspector. 'And, of course, I was sitting with my brother in the porch.' Arya faked a smile and cleared his throat. His stomach was making all kinds of squeaky noises. He could feel a fury rise from within. And suddenly his entire expression changed. The face became hard and emotionless; the stammering was gone, and each and every word was spoken slowly but firmly. It was as if an untamed soul had entered his body. 'This is where you all are wrong.' Arya banged his knuckles on the armrest. 'This is where betrayal creeps in. This is where everything in this world loses its meaning... where love means nothing and greed means everything...

Everybody seemed hypnotized, unable to tear their stunned gazes away from Arya.

His voice was relentless. 'At 4:58, someone went into Esha's room, who after murdering my sister just couldn't stay inside the house, because someone was waiting outside. Escaping from the back door from my room was necessary because someone was expecting just that. Do

you know who that someone is? I am that person. And do you know who I was waiting for?

Someone groaned.

Arya's face was completely red. 'I was waiting for the person who had gone for an extra round... the person who was playing detective all this while after murdering my sister... Rishabh.'

Rishabh's body froze completely. 'Wh-What... are you saying...' he stammered. He felt weightless as if he was falling in a deep well which had no bottom to it. His body kept descending and Arya's voice resonated across his mind, *Rishabh murdered my sister*. His head was spinning, 'this is madness, I have not...' Rishabh gasped, his voice lacking the conviction expected in a dire moment like that. With a rising fury of disorientation building inside him, Rishabh could suddenly think of something important, a minor detail that could disprove Arya's story. He held on to his thought like a branch on a flooding river. 'But, your door... the back door was still latched. How... How did it manage to close itself?'

Arya laughed incredulously, disdain floating in his eyes. 'For a great detective like you, this is a very small thing. But.... I will answer you nonetheless.' Arya turned towards Mr. Dhruv who was sitting right next to him. 'Sir, when you heard Jyoti scream and came out of your room, where was Rishabh?'

'He crossed by me in the corridor.' His reply was immediate.

'Where do you think he was going?' Arya pressed.

'I don't know. Perhaps he was going to his room to call the Police.'

'Did you see him go into his room?'

Mr. Dhruv pondered for a moment but before he could answer, Arya fired another question. 'Forget that. Can you tell me why would he go to his room to make a call when there is a functioning telephone in the living room?'

The inspector suddenly remembered the phone call he had made to the sub-inspector from the living room. *The telephone in the living room worked.*

‘That means...’ the inspector ventured.

Arya interrupted again. ‘That means, before calling the Police, Rishabh did what had to be done. Close the back door in my room.’

‘This is not true... I had just seen my sister dead... I was not thinking clear...’ Rishabh protested, his voice did not seem his own. ‘Why would I murder Esha...’

‘This is the exact question that troubled me.’ *Why* would Rishabh murder Esha? I had solved the footprint dilemma, as soon as I sensed that Naina could have been lying. But there seemed to be no palpable reason *why* Rishabh would murder Esha. That was until he presented his version of truth about Esha’s murder. It was amazing work.’ Arya clapped mockingly, his eyes almost insisting others to clap with him. ‘From the very beginning there were a few things which bothered me. Why was Rishabh playing Sherlock? Why was he going around digging things up? Why was he so excited about the detective agency? Why was he taking the risk of meeting him in a secluded spot? Why wasn’t he just handing this task to the inspector?’ He paused and smiled. ‘Now I know. How could he have let the inspector interrogate the detective, when the *name* in the envelope was *his*?’

Rishabh stared numbly at Arya, as he went on.

‘This entire story, of him seeing the assailant wearing the same variety of shoes as Pranav was a hoax. He wanted to make sure, that the members of the board had enough reason to kick Pranav out of the company. Who wouldn’t believe a beaten down brother who was trying to avenge his beloved sister. But, that was only half of what he wanted to achieve through his story. The next bit was to convince everyone that Rashmi was the murderer. He twisted the facts and made them sound real. By the time he was done

with this part, Pranav and Rashmi were both heading for jail, one for misconduct and the other for murder. With Esha already dead, Rishabh had laid down the perfect masterplan... the shortcut to become the director of Arora Cements. *Greed.*'

The thin red Line

Chapter XXIV

Rishabh Arora had his hands over his face. He could feel the spasm in his shoulder but he couldn't remember why it hurt. Confusion transformed into fear as Rishabh peeked through his fingers like a prisoner peeping through the iron bars. *Am I dreaming?* Through the mix of insanity, he tried to make sense of how suddenly everything lined up so perfectly against him. He felt a sudden rush of panic bubbling inside him. He tried to push it away. *I am missing something. A simple detail... Small... But important...What is it?*

Rishabh found it hard to digest that his own brother had come up with a logical connection so solid, it was enough to incriminate him in the court of law. He did not harbor a grudge against Arya, it was not his fault. The clues were there, and Arya had just arranged it logically. In that weak moment, he felt proud of his brother; he had always felt that his brother was a hard-minded simpleton, but today he had given a glimpse of his intellectual prowess to everybody. The logic was there to be derived, and it was not Rishabh who had seen it, it was his brother. He was proud, but *trapped*.

The onlookers let out exclamations of horror and anguish but Rishabh couldn't hear anything. The fog of pride for his brother lifted almost immediately and he began exploring a wild territory. Cold wind brushed against his face. It was difficult to concentrate, as if panes of glass were shattering inside his head. It was getting more and more difficult to breathe. He wanted to scream. *There is something I am missing. It is right in front me; I just need to see it.* Rishabh

was confident, there was an aberration; that the lens of observation was flawed somewhere... but where?

'I cannot believe it. This scumbag was trying to frame everybody. This lying piece of...' Pranav jerked his head and turned towards the inspector, his fiery eyes filled with contempt.

This time Rishabh had heard. The world was closing in on him. He had very little time to prove his innocence. Images around him were blurred, all the blood was flowing to his brains, but he couldn't find the flaw he was looking for. He pressed harder. A minute to five, he had gone for an extra round, Rashmi had left Esha's room by then. She was alone in her room. As Arya had pointed out, it was possible for him to go inside, murder Esha, intersect the house and escape through the back door in Arya's room. There was enough time for these activities, and the footsteps could confirm it. His lungs were bursting, every muscle, every tendon feeling the stress of the situation. A fire was spreading inside him, fanned by his own breath. Eyes bulging out in horror, he fell violently on his knees, letting out a wail of anguish. *Whose footmarks were those?*

The inspector seemed convinced, yet he ran the facts in his mind for a confirmation. The motive was clear – property. Rishabh was selling off confidential information in exchange of money. When Esha learnt about his treachery, he silenced her. He did not stop there, he made sure everyone suspected Pranav for this information exchange. Pranav was not happy with Esha's position in the company and everybody was aware of this. Taking advantage of this preconceived opinion everyone had of Pranav, Rishabh convinced everybody that Pranav was selling confidential information to belittle Esha's managerial capability. Everybody bought this logic. Then Rishabh came up with a false story about the shoes which served as the final nail in the coffin. He knew that the board members would vote Pranav out of power, and all that was left between the

throne and him was Rashmi. He twisted the facts and made her look like the culprit. The fingerprints and the sweater helped him in that mission. The inspector shook his head, clearly impressed by the ingenuity of the plan.

Rishabh was still kneeling on the ground but then something happened. Along with the kaleidoscope of images swirling in his mind, he could hear a voice with perfect clarity. The world around him was spinning, the images were foggy, but the voice was crystal clear. It was Anubhav's voice, *"Rashmi hurried out of the front entrance. She was shouting at someone on the phone. The sliding door screeched loudly when she closed it behind her."*

The inspector couldn't see it anymore. He remembered the instances when he had asked his son to study hard and be more like Rishabh. It seemed like a distant dream then, but now he could feel a bit of relief that his son had made zero efforts to emulate a murderer. All he wanted now was to relieve Rishabh from his agony. The case would be closed; the district magistrate would be happy and the 'The Jackal' could go home and confess to his son, how wrong he had been. He adjusted himself on the seat, ready to rise.

Rishabh was on the floor, his head down. The world around him seemed to be moving. He could see an image; it was hazy but once gain the voice associated to it was clear. *The entrance door was open and I was feeling cold. Old bones cannot bear the cold. So, I went and closed it."*

Finally, Rishabh could see a white light. It was like sunlight piercing through the fog of confusion and chaos. His vision was clear. His grey eyes glistened. A chill raked his flesh, and with a tempest of emotions ready to burst out, he jerked himself up to his feet.

Rishabh Arora stood trembling on the porch of the Arora Mansion, unable to believe the vision he had. A single word echoed inside his head. Like a whisper. One word.... the name of the murderer. The nerves around his ears were echoing his heart beats. He lunged forward.

Jyoti recoiled in her seat, startled by the movement.

Alarmed, the inspector jumped to his feet and took a step forward.

With a sudden jerk, Rishabh stormed towards the inspector, crouched beneath his extended arms; balanced himself with his broken left arm and twisted; his right hand was outstretched like a claw. It grabbed the neck of the person, who fell backwards with the chair. Rishabh jumped over, his right arm rose and fell. There was a screeching noise.

The voices in his head resounded like thunder. *"The sliding door screeched loudly when she closed it behind her. The entrance door was open and I was feeling cold. Closed! Open! Who opened the door?"*

The confrontation lasted only a few seconds. It all happened very fast.

The inspector finally managed to pull Rishabh over. The scene was staggering. The sub-inspector was almost immobilized by the terrified face staring up at him from the floor.

Rashmi stood stunned, looking around herself expecting to find an answer in the other confused eyes that stared down at the person lying on the floor. The sub-inspector whispered beneath his breath. *'Oh my God.'*

The inspector had his arms around Rishabh as he struggled to get away. Taking a cue from the others, who were all standing now, he peeped over Rishabh's shoulder and cringed. His face went white as if he was staring straight into the headlights of a speeding truck. Immediately, the inspector released the grip around Rishabh's waist and took a closer look at the hapless figure lying in front of him.

Rishabh's ears were still ringing. *The sliding door screeched loudly when she closed it behind her. The entrance door was open and I was feeling cold.* Rashmi had closed the entrance door behind her at 4:35. Until around

five, Anubhav was guarding that door and no one had used it. Yet, when Meera arrived in the living room at five minutes past five, it was open. This time Rishabh heard the voice loud and clear.

The inspector moved towards the writhing body, his right hand on his belt. There was stunned silence. After days of agony and despair, the realization was finally settling in.

‘You need to get up on your feet. Try and do nothing stupid... Put your hand behind your...’

Then, it was as though everything happened at once.

Suddenly, something passed by the inspector’s ear, hissing like an angry snake. The glass entrance door exploded... million pieces of glass flew in the air. He did not hear the second hiss, he felt it on his left arm. Survival instinct kicked in... everybody fell on the floor trying to save themselves. The sub-inspector did not have a weapon, he peeped through the gaps on the railing. Three men with black scarves around their faces were running towards them. Each of them carried a gun. Jyoti screamed as she crawled desperately on the floor looking for cover.

With everyone on the floor and the inspector writhing in pain, one person rose; standing erect, looking down at everybody. The figure stood with a chest partially bare from the confrontation with Rishabh minutes before. A thin red line on the person’s upper chest was gurgling blood. It was fresh, there were multiple stitches around it and the bandage covering it originally, was lying on the floor. The three men stood behind, pointing the gun towards the ones who were lying on the floor. One of them looked up, but seeing the gun pointed at him looked down immediately.

Time stopped... as if every moment was separated by an eternity.

The figure knelt and lifted Rishabh’s cheek with his finger. There was nothing Rishabh could do. His head injury was throbbing, tension flowed through his body in waves. The hollowness of despair was eating him from inside.

‘Look at me.’ The tone was calm, beyond anger or sorrow.

Rishabh felt powerless as he gazed into the pitiless eyes, lines forming on his forehead. He could not see the face; it was a lump of grey against the rays of the sun. The weight of truth felt like an anchor pulling him down a bottomless ocean.

‘It was always me, *brother...* It was always me.’ Arya hissed. Rishabh felt a stirring of fury rise within him. ‘I would have told you eventually, but you figured it out all by yourself.’ Arya sighed. ‘Only, for this stupid scar on my chest...’

‘How long do you think you can run?’ Rishabh barked, amazed by the boldness in his voice.

‘SHUT UP SHERLOCK!’ Arya screamed, his jaws quivering unpleasantly. Then in a flash, he swung his left hand and it landed squarely on Rishabh’s face.

The slapping sound reverberated in the silence.

‘You need not worry about me...’ Arya roared. ‘You think you are the smartest of all... don’t you? Biting off more than you can chew... see what you have bitten into this time. If I were you.... I would have been more concerned about myself...’

Rishabh felt the impact of the hard slap spread to his neck and spine. His face blazed red. For a moment, everything was dark. He nodded, forcing his left eye to open. He looked up straight into the eyes of his brother, his lips trembling.

Arya’s face was glowing like the setting sun. He was clearly enjoying the moment - No one had ever considered his opinion. He was told to shut up every single time. But, now everyone was at his feet, forced to listen whatever he had to say. Especially his brother. His face curved into a mean smile.

Rishabh felt paralysed by the shock of his own certainty. Truth need not always be spoken out loud, sometimes it is

clearly visible in the eyes.

His brother had become a monster. He was not looking for money. He was not looking for power. He just wanted to prove his intellectual superiority... He had many chances to murder Rishabh, but he didn't. He wanted to win the logical battle. Now that he had lost this one... the game would continue. More people would lose their lives for no reason at all and this was the truth.

Even in the silence the message was clear. *It's not over. Arya will come back, soon...*

Living in borrowed Time

Chapter XXV

Snaking through the throng of passengers at the Chandigarh railway station, Arya felt a wave of panic bubbling inside him. His world looked strange in every direction. Hazy figures staring at him. In a terrifying instant, he noticed a hapless beggar looking at him. At once, he twisted and turned through the crowd, pressing on his fake moustache hoping the adhesive would stay strong until he boards the train. He pushed the rim of his full-rimmed spectacles up his nose and glanced shiftily at every passing stranger. Accompanying the gravity of being a hunted criminal, Arya could still feel the icy stare of his brother cutting through his skin. Those pointy, grey eyes were telling him that he had lost.

How could he lose?

The plan was full-proof. He had covered all the blind spots, but...

In hindsight, the decision to keep a backup ready for action had paid its dividends. Hadn't he planned for it, he would have been arrested immediately and transported to the local jail.

Two policemen, dressed in khaki uniform were walking towards Arya. He bent down immediately pretending to tie his shoes.

One little mistake. A little scratch on my chest.

The policemen went by without noticing him. Arya sighed, contemplating how his life had changed forever. From now on, he would have to spend his entire life in hiding.

One little mistake.

Strangely, among so many people, Arya felt a familiar sense of loneliness settling on him. It was nothing new; he had felt this way since Esha had left him to rot in Palampur. Growing up with no parental supervision whatsoever, Arya had always felt like an alien in his own planet... like a fish outside water. Esha moving abroad had a huge impact on him, more so because he had modelled himself like her. Just like Esha, he too liked spending time alone rather than in the company of others. He did have a few friends, but they engaged themselves in activities that held no interest to him. He loved his brother, but the only thing Rishabh cared about was academics and an odd opportunity to belittle him. Esha's void was too deep to fill, and every effort to substitute his brother to her position ended with some condescending remark like, 'instead of chasing squirrels, why don't you do something worthwhile? Go to your room and study.'

With time, Arya had learnt to live like a ghost. He immersed himself into books and video games, still expecting his sister to arrive and save him from the mess his life had turned out to be. When Esha returned, he was convinced everything would become normal once again. His joy however was short-lived, Esha was stuck in her own problems forcing herself to feel things she just couldn't. She was trapped in a journey of self-discovery, which was beyond Arya to comprehend. She couldn't deal with her own insecurities and she chose to sweep it under the rug, beneath loads and loads of work.

Arya continued to live like a ghost.

TRAIN NUMBER 8281 UP CHANDIGARH MUMBAI MAIL
HAS ARRIVED ON PLATFORM NUMBER TWO.

The monotone voice of the caller revived Arya from his thoughts. He ran towards the unreserved compartments, scaling the entire length of the platform. The gate of the bogie wasn't open, and there was a huge line in front of it. He stood in line.

He looked straight ahead, his thoughts circling like the rotors of a helicopter. Suddenly, the glistening tracks in front of him disappeared, and he found himself sitting in the dimly-lit living room of the Arora Mansion, surrounded by a few pairs of brooding eyes. It was seven months back; Arya was facing a barrage of questions regarding his choice of subject for graduation. Esha and Rishabh were sitting right opposite to him and Meera was standing behind him near the corridor.

Rishabh's frustration was evident in his voice. 'This is serious, no one in our family has ever done that.'

'But,' Arya protested feebly, 'I-I can still work at the factory.'

'And do what? Teach Shakespeare to the workers? Has Keats preached about calcination?' Rishabh barked, his sarcastic jibe conveying that only an engineering degree could allow Arya to contribute meaningfully to their family business.

Silence fell over the room, as Rishabh rose and walked up and down behind the sofa. 'I could understand if you chose commerce,' said Rishabh impatiently, stopping behind Arya. 'You could help us with the finance. But Arts? I... I simply cannot believe we are having this conversation.'

Arya turned his gaze towards Esha, his watery eyes pleading for help.

She was silent all the while, but the words she said next, came as a shock to him. 'I think your brother is right, Arya,' she said soothingly.

Arya recoiled in his seat, he felt as if someone had wrapped a barb wire all around his body. He sat there silently, the barb wire tightening around his neck.

From then on, everything changed. Arya was miserable; he stopped eating and never came out of his room. He was always rewinding the tape in his mind, *I think your brother is right*. He had hoped, she would take his side and rebuke his brother for forcing him to choose a subject he had no

interest in, but instead she had chosen to side with Rishabh – *the smart one*. Arya spent most of his time looking at his reflection in the mirror. Sometimes, he would stand so close, his breath would fog the glass. He would wipe it off, but suddenly he couldn't recognize the face. The voices inside his head had taken over.

What was Rishabh? Nothing but dust at his feet. For once he wanted to prove that he was smarter than him. But how? The helplessness at the injustice of his fate burned a hole in his soul.

Days passed by, but somewhere deep within, Arya kept expecting a call from Esha. He imagined that when she would find out about his state, she would ask him to pursue whichever subject he desired. That call never came, and Arya buried his face into a pillow and cried. Choice of the subject just did not matter, if Esha would have asked him to take up engineering, he would have done so without any questions. But, she had instead done an unspeakable thing, she had chosen to side with Rishabh. He could have consoled his heart that Esha did not love him anymore, but to get into terms with the fact that Esha had replaced him with Rishabh was much more difficult. *How could she? Just because he is smart?* The voices inside his head kept saying, *you are smarter than him*.

'You are my number one. You will always be my number one,' Esha used to say before tossing baby Arya in the air, and extending her arms to catch him back. Arya was never scared; he knew that the most dependable person was there to catch him. His first words were not *Maa*, it was the name of a person – Esha. But, things had changed. This person was no longer the way she had been; she had switched sides ignoring the one person who loved her.

He felt like a goat which is fed succulent grass for a month before being slaughtered.

The voices inside Arya's head grew with time. It convinced him that the pain he was feeling was just part of

the game. When he had suffered long enough; he decided to make Esha pay. He knew what she loved most... Arora Cements. Priorities were twisted; the compulsion to act became the reason for action. The seduction of revenge was so strong that love did not have a chance.

Arya stole the proposal documents and sold it to the rivals. *Thrice.*

The blaring horn of an incoming engine pulled him out of his reverie. The line was moving now. He walked inside the carriage and got a window seat, but it was near the toilet and the putrid smell of urine made his eyes burn. He pulled the collar of his shirt to cover his nose, and stared vacantly down the platform. Once again his thoughts carried him away, this time to that fateful evening.

It had all happened in a blur.

While the board meeting was in progress, Arya was in the garden, resting on the bench, shooting adroitly at the terrorists in a game on his mobile. Suddenly, he heard hurried footsteps... he glanced up, and saw Esha emerging from the house, running towards the gate. She had a nervous look on her face, like a person waiting for a crucial medical result.

A young man, with small eyes and no facial hair whatsoever was waiting for her on the other side of the gate. When Esha reached him, he simply handed over a blue envelope. No words were exchanged. Esha turned and left immediately... her charcoal eyes burning with a mixture of hatred and despair.

It was uncanny that Esha would leave a board meeting for an envelope.

Curiosity got the better of Arya and he moved towards the gate cautiously. By then, the stranger was inside his car smoking away a cigarette. He glanced up at Arya and immediately looked away. In the next instant, the engine revved up to life and the cigarette was flicked out of the

window. Then, the little green car swerved a little, and sped down the road, leaving behind a ball of dust.

At once, Arya knew what the envelope contained.

Arya couldn't allow Esha discover that it was her lovely, little brother who was selling classified information. The results would have been humiliating - he would have been publicly shamed and then thrown out of the house. That was something he couldn't let happen.

At 4.58, Rishabh pulled his socks up, tousled Arya's already untidy hair and left for an extra round around the house. Arya smiled at his brother and then turned expectantly, his eyes piercing through the foggy glass door behind him. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. He could see Anubhav getting up from the couch and going towards Rashmi's room. His heart was pounding in his mouth. There was no one in the living room and he knew it would take Rishabh at least two minutes to complete the round. This was his opening.

The path was clear, he slid through the glass door, walked down the corridor and entered Esha's room through the side door.

At the rear end of the room, Esha stood silently, a thin camisole covering her trembling body, and her watery eyes fixed at the horizon. Her body had gone numb; her ears were ringing as she raised her hand to support herself against the window. Just then, a couple of high definition pictures fell on the floor.

She had opened the envelope, *she knew*.

There was no other option but to silence her. Arya stepped forward:

Esha turned, aware of the sound behind her. An outstretched arm bearing a brick struck her on the head. She fell on the floor with a heavy thud. At once, Arya picked the pictures and placed it inside the envelope. But it wasn't over, Esha was scrambling on the floor. He took a pillow and

pressed it on her face till every ounce of life had left her body.

The back door was open; he threw the brick into the arrangement of the flowers on the other side of the path. Just when he was about to step out, he heard someone's footsteps at the next door.

It was almost five, and Rashmi was trying to get away from Anubhav who was chasing her around, thinking she was Esha. Her exit from the back door of Anubhav's room forced Arya to use the same path he had taken to arrive there.

It was risky, if someone would have spotted him coming out of Esha's room, the consequences could have been devastating. But there was no time to think, he had a few seconds before Rishabh would be back on the porch. The striking clock in the living room started to chime.

He rushed through the corridor, and then exited through the glass entrance door. As the echo of the fifth gong from the striking clock faded, Arya could see Rishabh arrive clumsily from his left. While behind him, Jyoti walked towards the study room, ready to protect Esha from Pranav, unaware that she was already dead.

When Rishabh reached the porch, he saw his brother sitting and stretching his legs, oblivious to the risky run Arya had gone for while he was away. Arya had been lucky; nobody had seen him, but he had made one small mistake; he had forgotten to latch the glass entrance door.

The deception was inch perfect, but *greed* got better of Arya. Esha was not the only one he hated, there was one more person - Rishabh. With his charming looks and superior intelligence, Rishabh had sneaked his way to the spot Esha had originally reserved for Arya. His brother was pompous about his intelligence and he looked down on him. The thrill of framing Rishabh for Esha's murder was too enamouring - it felt like outsmarting Newton in a Physics exam. By then, Arya had forgotten all about his dead sister

who loved him like anything. That's the crazy thing about conscience; good people don't need it while bad people don't have any.

Later in the evening, Arya wandered around his room thinking of a way to frame his brother. It didn't come to him until he realized that the foot stains he left behind while walking up and down his room could be used for a perfect setup. He unlatched his back door slightly, thereby completing the ruse. Later, he showed this to the inspector, planting a seed that someone had been in his room and used this back door. Why? No one would know, until Arya would explain it to them later.

The plan was working fine, until Rishabh somehow assumed that the blue envelope was connected to Esha's death. His faulty assumption that Esha had hired a detective to follow Anubhav, led him to the one place Arya dreaded – the agency, whose detective had followed him around while he was negotiating deals with JK Cements. So, he tried to convince his brother not to pursue the risky idea of meeting the detective. He tried to bring Naina and Meera into the game to sway him away from pursuing the mystery of the blue envelope.

When nothing worked, Arya chose to stay behind claiming that he would prefer keeping an eye on the streets, thereby allowing Rishabh to meet the detective alone. There was no way he could show his face to the detective or else it would have been game over automatically.

There was a good chance that the detective would reveal Arya's name, which luckily he didn't. He instead chose to extort money from Rishabh. Arya did not know this – he had prepared himself for the worst. He had chased off the drunkards from the alley, and he took cover in the darkness, ready to pounce on his brother.

Had the detective revealed his name, Rishabh would have stormed out in a huff. Taking cue from this, Arya would

have emerged from the darkness, making Rishabh suffer the same fate as their sister.

No harm was done that night, but Arya couldn't allow Rishabh getting his hands on that information. So, Arya re-hired the goons who had previously assisted him while he negotiated deals for the stolen contract bids with JK Cements. The detective was supposed to meet Rishabh at eight, but he was captured and killed. His body was thrown down the valley near the Palampur *bazaar*. Everything that could connect Arya to the blue envelope or to Esha's murder was wiped off and then the shop was set on fire.

Half an hour before eight, one of the goons, brought the detective's green car to the Arora Mansion. The timing was very important, Arya wanted someone to see him inside the house at that time. Once, Jyoti delivered a cup of coffee to his room, the alibi was made. He escaped through the back door in his room wearing Pranav's shoes.

The plan was to make sure that Rishabh spots Pranav's shoes, which he did. Rishabh already suspected Pranav, and seeing those shoes was a confirmation of the crime. It was logical, Pranav's name was on that envelope and he had come to safeguard it. *The plan was working.*

But somehow the unfathomable happened. Even after taking so many hits, Rishabh mustered the courage to rise, and he scratched Arya's chest with a shard of broken glass, the wound becoming the permanent mark of his guilt.

The Mumbai Mail accelerated, tearing through the vast paddy fields... The train switched tracks and the vibrations were felt throughout the carriage. The click and sway of the train transported Arya back to the present. He ran his fingers on the bulging line on his chest. He pressed on it, and the wound burnt like a red-hot iron wire.

Something was happening to him; he pressed harder and harder on his chest wound. He felt an impulse to jump out of the train and return to Palampur. Sweat rolled down his face, pricking his eyes. He dug his nails into the wound and

hissed. *Control yourself. He is going nowhere. This time the deer will come to the hyena.*

Arya knew where he had to go and what he had to do there. Six months from now Rishabh was going to be there as well. The sights and sounds from the past flashed like lightning inside his head. *The deceit... the brother who thought he was the smartest...* He blinked several times, shook his head, forcing his mind to come back to the present.

Rock music blared from the mobile phone of a teenager sitting beside him. The shrill noise of an alarm clock ringing out in the first part of the music (Mission Impossible theme song) couldn't jolt Arya out of his thoughts. *The next few months are going to be critical.* The teenager glanced at his phone but did not receive the call; the tempo of the music kept increasing. The train rushed into the tunnel, the click of the wheels echoed in the hollowness of the compartment. When the train emerged out of the tunnel, there was a soft smile on Arya's face.

His mind was racing, facts popping up, some were being analysed and stored, others were discarded immediately. He wanted to be very thorough – every detail of the plan would have to be examined. A strategy was taking shape. Nothing would be left to chance this time. There would be no errors. No open doors. No marks on the chest.

In his mind, Arya was talking to his brother in a lofty tone, blood pounding in his ears. 'Every tale is a consequence of a past and it results into a certain future. The discomfort you felt this time, was only a prelude. There will be blood, lots of it. Only this time... it will be on your hands. It's just the beginning, brother. Six months from now, there is going to be a MURDER ON THE ROCKS.'

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