

*because...  
every raindrop  
is a* **HOPE**



**MANSI SHARMA | SANKALP KOHLI**

Because... Every Raindrop is a Hope

## About the Author

### Sankalp Kohli

Born and brought up in Kanpur, Sankalp is an MBA Graduate from NMIMS, Mumbai.

An entrepreneurial soul with an imprint of a perfectionist, he is a workaholic, who believes in turning every single moment of life into something constructive and fruitful. Being an avid reader since the beginning, he eventually began giving his thoughts and ideas, the wings of words in the form of blogs.

He is a person who holds his parents above all, especially his mother. All his dreams and aspirations are driven by his wish to make his parents feel proud.

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### Mansi Sharma

Having a zeal to sail the vessel, till the river runs dry in the chase of her dreams; Mansi is a person who takes the challenges and surprises what life and destiny throws at her, with courage.

Nesting big dreams from her childhood in the Beautiful City of Chandigarh, post her Graduation in Physics (Hons.) from PU, she moved to Pune for her Masters. An MBA Graduate from SCIT, Pune, Mansi is presently working in one of the top Indian Telcos.

With a slice of painter, dash of an avid reader, a writer and an unexplored poet, she is an emotional and sensitive person.

To know more about her, mail her at: [mansisharma2287@gmail.com](mailto:mansisharma2287@gmail.com).

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*... I Love you Rachu ...*

*Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu*

*I thinks see knows my name*

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MANSI SHARMA  
AND  
SANKALP KOHLI



GENERAL PRESS

*Published by*

**GENERAL PRESS**

4228/1, Ansari Road, Daryaganj

New Delhi – 110002

Ph. : 011 – 23282971, 9911359970

e-mail : [generalpressindia@gmail.com](mailto:generalpressindia@gmail.com)

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First Edition : January 2013

ISBN : 9789380914435

Edited by Mohit Naryani

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Published by Azeem Ahmad Khan for General Press

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# Dedication

Our Source of Life, Our Soul, Our Almighty... *Our Parents.*  
Love you... *Maa & Dad*  
This one's for you...



## Acknowledgement

*Because... Every Raindrop is a Hope*, is seeing the light of the day, simply because of...

Our destinies, for bringing the moment: *11 October 2011, 1632 hours*, in our lives. The moment that changed the definition of the word 'friendship'... making it a Bond of a Dream, which began with 3 golden words – '*We are Team*'.

God... the almighty, for bestowing us with the courage to take our first step towards our *Lakshya*.

Blessings of **Sushma & Satish Chandra Kohli** and **Meenakshi & Rakesh Sharma**... Our Parents, for being God's Best Gift to us, who on reading this would be thanking God for blessing them with Angels like us.

Mayank Sharma and Madhur Kohli, those lucky human beings, who share more than 99% of the same sequence of nucleic acids on their DNA strands, as us.

Mr Azeem Ahmed Khan, General Press, for giving us this opportunity to turn our dream into reality.

Deepak Kulkarni Sir, for being our most beloved critic, for giving us his valuable feedback, bantering us to the limits in the endeavor to bring the Best out of us, and Uncle Rajiv, for always guiding Mansi to follow her dreams.

Nitesh and Nikhil, for soon gonna be running to catch hold of Sankalp's neck, for incidental and intentional resemblance to some characters in this book.

Aditi and Nancy, for committing to sell more than 1000 copies each, with utmost sincerity and selflessness, and Sanya, Prajakta, Pragati, Shivam, Abhinna, Swapnil, Anubhav and Ritesh for promising us to not to ask for a complimentary copy of this book.

RTP Infotainment for handling our marketing portfolio and its founder for not charging us for the same and Santosh Bhaiya (Irla Book Center) for his indispensable help.

While the list goes on and on, a moment of memory of late Mrs. Shibani Singh, for teaching Mansi all the alphabets and grammar, she knows today.

But, the most important of all, to you, our readers, for spending your hard earned money & sparing your valuable time to read our work.



For our readers, a few words...

*As Long as Every Dusk gives you a Dream,  
As Long As Every Dawn gives you a Hope,  
Remember, there is a bit of Life waiting between the two!!!*

## Preface

*Life Happens. Then Love Happens.*

*But which one comes with a Guarantee?*

*Life doesn't come with a 'Smiley' Tag.*

*True.*

*We all know that. Everyone Accepts it.*

*But then, why crib if Love doesn't.*

*Before the cupid knocks on the door of your heart, does it ever say, 'Open the door. I am all happiness'?*

*Epic Love Sagas teach: Even if life ends, love doesn't.*

*But who teaches the reverse of it?*

*Why do we start feeling... 'Life has ended, simply because love ended?'*

*All lovers claim, they can't give up on love, but if you can't give up on love; why give up on life?*

*When Life comes, Love comes; when Love comes, Hope comes...*

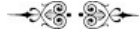
*But then, when Love cannot go; Hope shouldn't...*

*And, as Long as Hope is still there,*

*Life still is...*

## Chapter 1

# Deep in Heart... First Love



*They say, Life is difficult, I say, who wants it to be easy;  
They say, hold things or else they would be gone, I say, value them and say  
“Sorry I was wrong”;  
They say, try not to hurt those... close to your heart, I say, ensure stupid  
things don't set them apart;  
They say, always tell what they mean to you, I say, do that before your  
time is through;  
They say, people are either good or bad,  
I say, all are good, circumstances make a few, bad;  
They say, be with the one who loves you,  
I say never let go the one who loves you;  
They say life's all about moving on,  
I say... Cum'on, bring it on!*

As the train started moving, all I could hear was the sharp whistle of the engine and the squealing of the steel wheels on the track. A sort of, ‘inexplicable heaviness’ was growing inside me.

A part of me wanted to just get down and run back... run back to, where it all began.

*‘Did you ever have the feeling that you wanted to go, and still have the feeling that you wanted to stay? Still you knew you wouldn't be very long. Go or stay, stay or go’* – These lyrics of James Durante's echoed in my ears.

“STAY or GO, GO or STAY?”

Something was holding me back; not letting me go.

But Life is all about moving ON and not looking back.

Amidst this quandary, everything started flashing in my mind, as if within a moment, I was watching my life till date. Going through all the moments and instances of my life, it was one of those moments when you go into the pages of history so as to memorize the events and relive them.

Fighting within... caught between head and heart, I closed my eyes, turning the

psychedelic key ON, trying desperately to shut the thoughts off.

Leaning on the totally shut window of my Mumbai-Delhi, *Paschim* Express, as I closed my eyes, those years started to move in reverse, slowly ticking backwards and I could see myself changing forms... from a youthful 24 to a restless 18.

Why this phase?

May be because, that part of my life is what had been vital in shaping my present. May be that's the premise of today's 'Raj'.

I opened my eyes to see myself standing on platform number 8 of Mumbai CST station along with a couple of childhood friends, the best ones I ever got – Rohan and Rahul.

Though I never have and maybe never would, say it to them, but yes... 'They are an inseparable part of my life – rather me.'

Spellbound and stunned to see hundreds and thousands of people hustling all around us. Some, rushing to catch their train, some, barely able to get inside, some, almost hanging outside, still we could see, Mumbai at its pace. As if, the whole of Mumbai had amassed at one place.

Contrary to small town like Kanpur, *Mumbai was Grand*.

Yes, it was GRAND!

And that's when I realised, this is it – the Biggest city of India.

While Rahul tried to figure a way out of platform, Rohan and I, were busy guarding our luggage (might sound a little stupid, but I still remember Rohan's grandpa's parting words about Mumbai and stories of tricksters, thieves... so we just held on to our luggage and were passing nervous glances to the passers-by).

Suddenly, our eyes fell on a gang of college-girls, trying to fight their way into a local train. The train stopped, but within seconds started moving again. One of the girls stepped on an oil spill and slipped on the platform.

Luckily, she made a narrow escape.

Only a couple of people standing there moved to help her. She got up and started walking with a limp when suddenly, a lady bumped into her.

She shouted at the lady, "*Dikhta nahi hai kya?*"

The lady turned and shouted back at her, "*Madam, yeh Mumbai hai. Yahan langde ko bhi bhaagna padta hai.*"

That's what Mumbai is, 'It never stops. For no reason. For nobody'.

It just goes on and on. That's what is known as... ***The Mumbai Spirit.***

This whole episode left us terrified. Rohan who was already skeptical about coming to Mumbai turned towards me and said, "Raj, how are we going to survive in this town. It seems people here do not stop at all."

I looked at him and said, "It's ok man, just chill, that girl is totally fine now."

In order to digress from the topic I asked Rohan to call up the hostel warden and ask about the place where we had to report. Meanwhile, I called my parents to inform them of our safe arrival.

I still remember Maa's sobbing when she came to see me off at the station. All worried and perturbed, with tears trickling down, she kept reminding me to keep her

updated of my wellbeing.

Well MOMs, that's how God made them. I know she wouldn't have slept all night, worrying about me. So, I called her.

I have this habit of walking while I talk, after completing my call I turned around and saw Rohan standing alone with our entire luggage. I passed a sheepish smile and started moving towards him. I could see Rahul approaching Rohan. As soon as I took a few steps towards Rohan, he started shouting on top of his voice

“We got the JUHU Hostel Raj! We got what we wanted.”

JUHU Hostel... well, might sound as if we had achieved the ultimate *Lakshya* of our lives. But trust me, though it sounds quite pesky, but only Mumbai College of Engineering and Management Studies A.K.A. MCEMS guys can tell what value JUHU Hostel holds for them.

Since real estate is a big problem in Mumbai, our college had 3 satellite hostel buildings located in all together different areas – Juhu Church, Vile Parle (West) and Santa Cruz (West).

Amongst them, Juhu Church Hostel was the most desired because, One – It was located just next to Sun and Sand beach, where one could frequently see Bollywood stars in their routine haunts; Two – Next to it was the girls hostel; Three – The rooms were large, airy and were available on twin sharing as against other hostels where triple sharing was allowed. So evening sunset on one side and glimpse of pretty girls loitering in their night dress, all across their corridors and hanging on their balconies clinging to phones, used to be one thing for which any guy would give away even the last drag of a fag being shared by ten guys. We were lucky to have this hostel throughout our college tenure.

Rahul was equally happy to hear this, in fact it was Rahul who used his contacts to get in touch with some of our seniors in our alma mater, MCEMS, to seek their advice on things like, the hostel we should opt for, places we should be visiting, lifestyle of Mumbai etc.

After congratulating each other, we started moving towards the taxi stand in a cheerful mood. Rahul as usual took the lead and hired a taxi.



It was already 6:30 p.m. when we got rooms allocated to us. Rohan and I were to share one room on the 5th floor of the hostel, while Rahul was allocated a room on the 3rd floor which he had to share with a guy named Akshit. To my surprise, the rooms were beyond all expectations, and had all the necessary entities like TV, refrigerator, washing machine, cupboard, etc. The balcony provided a magnificent view of the calm and composed Arabian Sea, where we later witnessed the various moods of the sea.

Too tired to unpack, I decided to rest for an hour before going for dinner. I went and sat on the easy chair placed in the balcony, with my feet resting on the railing.

Gazing at the pinkish orange sky, the first evening breeze caressed me and reminded me of my first ever kiss. No words could be put together to describe, what it felt and

what it meant to me.

One second I was standing there in front of Shruti, explaining a complicated algorithm, and the next second I wasn't, because my words were being pushed back, down my throat by her scented breath. It was one of those moments when your body goes into an auto-pilot mode and your 'basic-instincts' are awakened. To my surprise, I took a step closer to her and found myself reaching for her hand. I took it in mine and looked right at her, but she didn't step back. Instead I could see her eyes drooping and lips parting and the moment I thought of stepping back, she had already planted a gentle kiss on my lips. It was not the kind of kiss we see in the movies, it was wonderful in its own way. I knew straight away that the memory of my first kiss will last for a life time.

Shruti belonged to my home town Kanpur, and was a year junior to me. She was a real sweetheart; she used to laugh at my silly attempts at humor. She had a simple and innocent smile which got highlighted by the twin dimples that appeared on her cheeks. Her beautiful grey eyes used to make me lose track of time and the world around.

We dated for almost two years. I still remember each and every minute detail of the day, when everything fell apart. It was her 17th birthday. I was really geared up for her birthday and wanted to make it special for her. I took a day off from my Maths coaching class. I had informed Rohan and Rahul about my plans. As always, they were more than willing to help me by lying to my parents about my whereabouts, in case they contacted them.

Everything was going as planned; I picked her up from coaching class at around 5 and took her for a long drive. I was to drop her by 8 and get back home by 8:15. Had everything gone this way, I would have bunked yet another class and remained committed. But on our way back, we got stuck in a gigantic traffic jam. It took us almost two hours to get out of it.

Shruti was really tensed as her parents were very particular about her reaching home on time. She'd told me that 8 o'clock was the deadline for her and it was already 9:45.

I could see tears rolling down her cheeks, but there was nothing I could say at that time to console her. Deep within, I was already cursing myself for coming out with such a pathetic plan.

We reached her place at 9:50, but to our surprise, her car was not there. The building guard informed us that her parents had gone out and would be late. Suddenly, the tears vanished from her face giving way to those cute little dimples. She kissed me before going inside her building and said, "Thank you Raj, you are such a darling. Today was the best day of my life," I was glad that she felt so, and replied, "You are welcome, I think, I did just fine," she smiled.

"I should leave now, Madam."

"Yeah, sure. Bubyee."



I was sitting on my study table, totally immersed into organic chemistry, trying to compensate for the lost time. I could hear the constant crackling sound made by the

window AC and the hourly whistles of my building guard. Suddenly, my landline started to ring and scared the hell out of me.

I answered the call, "Hello."

But there was no reply.

I repeated, "Hello."

The suspicion grew within me, so this time my voice was a bit louder. But still no one answered.

Just as I was about to hang up, I heard someone sobbing from the other end. A chill ran down my spine as I realised it was Shruti.

I regained my composure and firmly said, "Shruti, what happened? Why are you crying?"

She could not handle it and started crying over the phone.

I was afraid but I knew I couldn't show it to her.

I tried to reinitiate the dialogue and make her talk, so I asked sternly, "Will you please tell me what happened? We will deal with the situation, trust me. Just stop crying and tell me what happened."

I could still feel her sobs. She replied coldly, "Raj, everything between you and me is over. This is the last time I am talking to you."

It came as a bolt from the blue, my feet started trembling and I had to sit down on a chair in order to avoid an abrupt fall. A couple of tears rolled down my cheeks. I quickly wiped them and tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

"Mom and Dad have found out about us."

"Whaaaaat?"

"Yeah, today when I was out with you, my grandmother suffered a cardiac arrest. Doctors said that she was very critical. Since, I was very close to her, Dad immediately left to fetch me from my coaching. The guard informed him that I had left with some guy."

She took a deep breath, and started again, "After I reached home, I got a call from my dad that he was in hospital, and in a very serious tone, he told me that my grandmother had expired."

From stuttering and stammering, she began to cry on top of her voice.

Shocked and stunned, I found myself facing a pandemonium of emotions. A part of me wanted to cry with her while another, wanted to console her.

I tried to soothe her, "Shruti listen to me, it was not your fault."

In an antagonizing tone she interrupted, "It was. I could have at least, been by her side. God has punished me. I have already caused enough pain to my family."

Her voice broke for a few seconds, but she cried and continued, "From now on Raj, I will not maintain any contact with you. Raj, if you ever loved me then I beg before you not to ever call me again."

Sobbing incessantly, she continued, "Please try and understand Raj, I will not be able to forgive myself, if I'll stay in touch with you. Please forgive me. Please..."

Crying and howling, she just hung up.

Time stood still, it was the first 'shock' of my life. No logic, No reason, a couple of

hours ago that damn woman was saying, 'This was the best day of my life', and now, with one definitive sentence, she had wiped out all happiness from my life. WTF!

True to her words, she never ever came back to me again.

Even I could never muster the courage to contact her. Though deep down, I wanted to... always.

It was an abrupt end to an exquisite relationship.

Though I can still feel our first kiss, I can still hear her cheerful voice, but the fact is – we are no more together.

With a sudden gust of wind, a coconut fell from the tree on the car parked below, making a loud blaring noise, which brought me back to the same balcony where I was. A sudden bolt of lightning and the calm sea changed its form, just like my life was shattered in a moment.

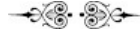
C'est la vie (this is life)! I had learned my first hard lesson in life.

*You Love, You Lose, Still You Live.*



## Chapter 2

# The Ragging Night



*“Tayyab Ali Pyaar ka Dushman Haaye! Haaye!*

*Meri Jaan ka Dushman, Pyaar ka Dushman Haaye! Haaye!”*

A coarse manly voice, alarmed every passenger present in the *Paschim* Express coach. Aware of the presence of an unwanted entity in the train, they quickly engaged themselves in one or the other activity. Oblivious to the weird changes going on in my surroundings, I was still enjoying a deep slumber.

All of a sudden, it felt as if someone was pulling my cheeks. The coarse sensation of that unwanted touch, almost instantly brought me back to reality. I opened my eyes and to my horror saw two eunuchs standing right in front of me.

In Mumbai, you come across them, at places as common as local trains and traffic signals. So, living in Mumbai, you are bound to encounter them, every other day. I'd had dozens of experiences with them during my college life but nothing was worse than this one.

Eunuchs are very smart and have strong intuitive powers. They always operate in a group of two or more and just by looking at someone they can tell, how much that person can shed. A friend of mine had once told me that the best way to avoid them is to continue with your work and not look at them. I had always followed this mantra and had successfully escaped their attention. My mom had always told me that one should never misbehave or maltreat them. They are bestowed with occult blessings or cursing powers by lord Rama, which makes them very powerful.

But this time I was caught on the wrong foot and the first thing that came to my mind was to take out a 10 rupee note and hand it over. I followed my instincts, but the moment I opened my wallet I realised I had done a grave mistake. My wallet was stuffed with the money that I'd withdrawn to cover all expenses of the journey.

I knew that a 10 rupee note will not suffice, so I took out a 20 rupee note but was stopped midway by one of the eunuch, *“Haaye, haaye, babu ye kya de rahe ho. Tumhari Sheela isse nai maanegi aaj.”*

She was already holding my chin before I could make a move.

Not knowing what to do next, I said, *“Mere pass itna hi hai, yehi le lo.”*

My irritated but nervous voice was more than enough for them to understand that they had got a *bakra* and that it was on their disposal as to how they would like to milk it.

Amidst all this jittery, I tried to get up but they blocked my way. Unable to balance myself, I fell back on my seat.

Meanwhile, the other eunuch after collecting money from fellow passengers came and sat right next to me. By the time, I became an object of entertainment, and was attracting a thousand eyeballs.

I was already fuddled, and she started taking a good feel of my body. I could feel her, reaching for my private parts. It was as grumpy as it could have gotten.

My embarrassment further intensified when she looked at her companion and said, “*Haaye, haaye, yeh to chuza hai re.*”

I could hear faint laughter and muttering as she zealously delivered her dialogue. In order to avoid further humiliation, I took out 50 bucks from my wallet and gave it to them. They took it happily and left me, amidst a sea of eyes continuously staring at me. I felt violated, raped and indignant and almost as impotent as them. That moment, I was wondering had Rahul been in my place, he would have never made the mistake of taking the wallet out. I felt stupid.

More so, I was indignant at all the co-passengers, who were having fun at my cost and probably thinking ‘Thank God it wasn’t me’.

Desperately wanting to escape the scene, my thoughts went to our college, then to Rohan and Rahul, and from there to the day when I was ragged by my seniors. It’s amazing how our brain connects one thought to another, like a trapeze artist – moving from one swing to other, until it reaches where it wants to be.

Ragging marks the unofficial beginning of college life. For the first two months, the so called ‘freshers’ have no better thing to do than to curse this custom, only to become its promoter, the next year.

My daily prayers to the almighty consisted of an added request, God please not tonight, but after a month even God was exhausted of being my savior. Thus, came the dreadful night when I along with Rohan and Rahul were chosen... were bullied mercilessly.

And the destined venue where our graves were supposed to be dug was the haunted hall near the D-hostel which was used as a *godown* to dump all the broken furniture and stuff. Since the beginning, we had heard rumors about the place being the home to some evil restless spirits. They say, long back, it used to be a common hall, but then, someone committed suicide there. Since then, the place is deserted.

Now, the sole purpose it served was that of a butcher shop where we were to be ‘sacrificed’, to please the fleet of monsters around. The hall was jam packed, all eyes were focused on us, believe me, it was as daunting as it gets. The sight of the sepulchral décor of the room almost made me wet my pants.

Glancing around nervously, I could see some somber portraits on the walls, staring right at me just like the other thousand eyeballs, as if, each of them asking for a piece of me. The room was dimly lit, with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, which

casted eerie shadows all around, only to add to the scary look of it. It was sparsely furnished with a few wooden chairs and a T.T. table that somehow managed to stay upright on its rickety legs. The ceiling above us hosted an array of dusty broken tube lights which successfully provided an ominous milieu. The dingy environ of the room had nothing but cobwebs, broken glass on the floor, dirt, rats; as big as the size of a cat, crawling on piles of dumped books and papers and heaps of clutter.

The crowd started to cheer as a stocky, bearded guy came forward and stood right in front of us. Dwarfing my 5 foot 10 inch physique, he looked down on me. I heard the crowd cheering, “Adi... Adi... clap... clap... clap...”

He acknowledged their cheers by raising his hand. Soon, the silence descended on the gathering, and I knew that the show was about to begin. Standing there, right in front of us, Adi seemed like a champion gladiator about to pick his kill.

“You,” he shouted, pointing towards Rahul.

“Can’t you see your seniors sitting in front of you? Introduce yourself.”

Rahul had a skinny built. Five feet and six inches tall, he used to look malnourished and perhaps that was the reason he was picked first, amongst us.

Not trying to look at the crowd, he nervously murmured, “My name is Rahul... Rahul Bhatia, Sir.”

“Okay,” said Adi, nodding his head approvingly.

“Rahul, which super hero you like the most?” continued Adi.

“Superman, Sir,” came a prompt and confident reply from Rahul.

Adi turned towards the crowd and said, “Good, now take this.”

Saying this, he threw a bundle of skin tight leggings with a tee at him. He picked up the clothes and began to proceed towards the washroom, when suddenly Adi shouted, “You idiot, where the hell are you going? Didn’t I ask you to change?”

Rahul in a scared tone replied, “Sir, I am going to the washroom to change.”

Adi suddenly interrupted, “You fool, I asked you to change HERE, right here.”

Listening to this, for a minute even I got terrified. Changing in front of that big crowd was surely a deal, but the most daunting fact was that there were so many girls around, staring with their lusty eyes, waiting for him to strip.

Rahul reluctantly began to pull down his pants, when one of the girls in the crowd, threw a lacy red panty right at his face, and screamed, “Wear this, my Superman.”

The crowd began howling.

That moment, I felt thankful to God, that it wasn’t me.

“You have fifteen minutes and your time starts now,” Adi roared.

Adi now turned towards Rohan and said, “Who the hell are you?” His tone suddenly hardened, his eyes were turning red and dilated with the passage of night.

Rohan all frightened and timid, stuttered in a low tone, “My name is Rohan Aaa... aaa... Awasthi.”

Adi, the giant hunk, as he looked in comparison to our scrawny and cowly Rohan, suddenly screamed. “Whaaaat...” and for a second, silence broke into the whole room.

The screaming, hooting crowd all of a sudden was quiet, like a night-graveyard.

He again geared up and roared, “What did you say... Hawasss... Thiii.”

I could see all girls and guys giggling in a weird demeaning manner.

Rohan was very calm and shy. He was always the polite docile kinds who could not take even a slight high pitch at him, and here he was being debauched, or in literal sense being ripped apart in front of this massive throng.

I was standing right behind him and as opposed to Rohan, the sadist in me was quipping and somehow trying to control my giggle. I would admit that instead of wondering about what’s in store for me, I was somehow enjoying the way they both were being beleaguered, forgetting for a minute that I was next. Some may even think, what kind of nerd I am, but I was the most chilled out amongst the Lot and was taking it all lightly, without having the slightest hint, of what’s gonna be my plight on this fateful horrendous, night. As I believed, ‘If you can’t avoid it, then better enjoy it.’

Anyways, suddenly the crowd burst into a big laughter. I could see girls banging benches, guys saying all sorts of “kind words” to Rohan.

Rohan, the poor lad, was trembling and sweating hard.

When suddenly, Adi, grabbed him from the collar and said, “*Bete, bahut hawas hai na... abhi karte hai tera illaj.*”

And to my surprise, I saw one of Adi’s accomplices bringing a laptop.

He placed it on the wobbling table tennis table lying behind us. Adi motioned towards the laptop and said, “Can you tell me what is being played on this laptop.”

“Blue Film,” I promptly replied, only to notice that all the eyes which were watchfully placed on Rohan, now were turning towards me. I knew I had committed a big mistake. With no option left, I tried to knock at God’s door once again and this time, Rahul came to my rescue.

The moment he was ready in his attire, the focus of the crowd and Adi shifted towards him and I, for a moment took a sigh of relief. Wearing, what seemed like, faded blue skin tight leggings, with a nice lacy red panty over it and a bright blue tee with a white bed sheet tied to his neck, Rahul caught everybody’s eye. His attire, in itself, was enough to make him the laughing stock for the evening.

“Where is your mask, buddy?” came the words from the mischievous sprite.

Rahul had no clue, it seemed like he was taking the wrath of devil’s curse. He just stood there staring at the floor. Meanwhile, the crowd was still holding its stomach and laughing.

I was thinking, what an evening like this would do to our confidence.

Rahul and I were the best of friends, but when it came to academics we were mighty enemies. Though we never admitted it, but there was always a tussle going on between us. I was always envious of Rahul’s poise as all my school teachers used to like him and I never left a stone unturned to demean him.

Adi turned towards the gathering and said, “Okay, Mr. Superman, though you are a bit underdressed for the occasion, but we still think you are our superhero. Your friend here, what is his name... aa... hawasss... thiiii, needs your help. You have to help him overcome his ‘hawass’ by fucking him right over here.”

The sadist in me again had a bestial giggle at its face seeing the misery of Rahul. But, due to colossal confusion caused within the audience, I somehow managed to escape the wrath of Adi.

I was wondering, what Rohan and Rahul would do. Surely, there was no easy way out of this convoluted trap.

The crowd went silent to give way to a shrieking sound, “Whaaaaat?”

Adi turned back and shouted “Will you play that damn thing.”

A blue film started on the laptop. My experience with the porn (5 years to be precise), helped me recognize the film in a moment... ‘Naughty America, best-f-bests’.

Adi pointed to the screen and said, “You, Superman, you will act as this guy, Hawasssthiiii, you are the blonde.”

Then, he turned down the sound and said, “All right, you have to make up the dialogues”.

Both Rahul and Rohan were turning pale, they were staring at each other blankly and their body parts were rarely moving, it seemed like they had turned into zombies.

“Start, idiots,” barked Adi.

Rahul took the lead and with an awkward discomfort started grunting. Rohan quickly joined in, increasing the magnitude of moaning with each passing minute. It was easier for both Rohan and Rahul to perform this sleazy task in front of a large crowd. I mean what could be more thwarting than imitating a porn star in a gathering of around 150 odd people.

Luckily for them, crowd was more interested in getting a glimpse of the laptop screen. Their grunting hardly commanded the attention of the audience. Adi was quick enough to react to this sudden change in the behavior of the crowd. He ordered for the movie to be stopped and turned towards me, I knew it was my turn, but I was confident that I would get through.

Adi roared, “What’s your name?”

“Raj Malhotra, Sir.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Kanpur, Sir.”

Silence engulfed the roar of the gathering for a while, but I was sure that Adi would have another outlandish idea.

For the very first time I heard Adi talking politely to a person, and that lucky person was I... me... myself. He said, “Oh, so you are from UP?”

Confidently I replied, “Yes, Sir.”

Just as I thought that I had struck the right cord with Adi, he aggressively marched towards me. Suddenly, words that earlier seemed like rose petals turned into boulders.

Bristling with anger, he held my neck and said, “You *bhaiyas* from UP come to Mumbai and spoil my city, today I will teach you the lesson of your life.”

He took out a packet from his bag. It contained a fine white powder. Hurriedly, he took a pinch of that powder and rubbed it over his teeth. Till now, I was baffled by the course of incident. Initially, I thought he got some kind of an anaphylactic shock and needed

immediate medical attention. But then, he took out some more powder and laid it on the table. Next he took out his college id card and arranged that powder in a line and sniffed it in one go. Within no time he seemed to be in a different world. His pupils disappeared and I simply tried to guess how worse it could get from here.

The very next moment, beat the crap out of me as I realised that the white powder was cocaine; fear gripped me as I thought, Adi might lose control over himself and its repercussions were going to be administered on me.

Never in my dreams could I have imagined what was about to come next.

And then a bomb exploded on my head.

“Now sniff it,” I thought he was talking to his friends.

Totally mystified by the progression of the night, a sudden thump on my shoulder shook the hell out of me. It was then that I realised that Adi was talking to me.

“Whaaaaaaat?” I blurted.

I could not even imagine myself consuming cocaine. All I had ever heard about it in Kanpur was that it’s an awful thing and once taken, a person becomes addicted to it. It then gradually eats you up like a termite and causes a painful death. At the age of 18, the only thing I didn’t want was DEATH.

“Yeah,” he said, shrugging, “You are not going from here tonight, without consuming this whole packet.”

I started pleading, “Please, I’ll do anything you want, but not this.”

“No, take it fucker, or I will force you to take it,” he answered in a grave tone.

My body temperature was rising. I got scared and believe me, never in my life had I been more petrified. I was finding it difficult to remain upright. I turned towards Rahul and saw that satisfied look on his face which forced me to repent the sadistic pleasure which I had derived when he was being ragged. *‘What goes around comes around.’* Damn it, already...

The fear of death was more than enough to make me cry in the loathsome gathering, I begged, I cried, I did everything that was practically possible to avoid, what was in store for me. Death seemed inevitable, so in a flash, I began to remember all those people, I loved the most – my parents, but neither Adi nor his friends were ready to spare me.

Adi got hold of my head, while two of his friends held my arms and torso. They forced my face on the powder lying on the table. I began to wiggle like a fish out of water.

With tears in my eyes I kept struggling with the trio, the tussle went on for over 3 minutes until they successfully brought my head near that white powder. My anxiety rose to such extent that the mere touch of that powder made me faint while I could feel the warm sensation in my trousers.

Till date, I am totally unaware of the events that occurred when I was lying unconscious on the floor.

For how long I don’t know, could not have been long as I could suddenly smell an onion and water being thrown on my head. I could hear all the *‘apsaras’* laughing. I was dead – Right – Oops no – I was on the floor, with the decibel levels reaching unheard

levels in that *godown*. I wish I was rather dead.

It was only when I got up that I came to know that I was being fooled, the whole time. The white powder was Glucon-D.

Even Adi was not a drug addict. He was just acting like one and when I recollected my thoughts, I realised that he never sniffed the powder, he just took it close to his nose, my brain perceived the rest.

I could see everyone around me holding their bellies and laughing. I was embarrassed to the core and was finding it hard to say anything. All I could manage was a sheepish smile.

When Rahul and Rohan noticed that I was up, they came running towards me, their smiles were 'ear to ear'. They collectively said, "Hey, are you ok now? By the way, thank you for all the melodrama, we were spared further humiliation."

"Yeah, I am fine now," I wanted to ask them, what the crowd thought about me, but stopped mid way as I saw Adi coming towards me.

He kept his arms on both Rohan and Rahul and leaning on their shoulders he said, "*Ye to chuza hai re.*" I got the opinion of the crowd from Adi. He cajoled me and told me that it was a prank.

And thus it was – THE RAGGING NIGHT – '*Another lesson learnt.*'



"*Bhai sahab, bhai sahab,*" a sudden voice broke my slumber. The passenger sitting next to me was patting on my shoulder, to wake me up.

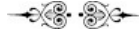
"It is 8 p.m. now, and my wife wants to sleep, so please can you shift to your middle berth," he requested.

I just got up sluggishly and opened the middle berth to set my bed.

I was too tired to even think about changing. I just crashed in the same jeans and tee, diving back into the beautiful memories of college.

## Chapter 3

### First Day @ College: 26 July, 2005



*18 years ago, holding me for the first time in their arms,  
They must have thought of a dream;  
14 years ago, holding my finger, dropping me for the first day at school,  
They must have dreamt what I would be;  
10 years ago, when I first stood first,  
They must have thought, those dreams would come true;  
6 years ago, when I walked up that stage to fetch my prize,  
My parents would have felt, a part of them was worthwhile;  
2 years ago, when I became the city's pride,  
Their happiness filled their eyes;  
And today, acknowledging all their sacrifice,  
Here I am, taking my FIRST STRIDE...!!!*

COLLEGE – The phase that marks the beginning of every boy's chase towards his *Lakshya*. Out from the shackles of those rigorous nights where one keeps wondering what the future had in store... What will I be? Whether I would be able to clear the exams and get into a reputed college? Those endless reminders from parents, full of hope that one day their son would make it big. One day, he would be like one of those inking, whose pictures would get posted on every possible coaching center's advertisement as the top rank holder in the big shots – the IITs, DCEs etc.

Those horrendous nights, burning mid night oil, not sleeping for a minute, trying every possible trick to stay awake, trying to make things work, and suddenly mom entering my room with some cookies and a glass of milk with those hopeful eyes and that caring touch on my head, asking if I needed something... and then gently caressing my back, saying, "*Beta*, work hard, I want you to become a CEO someday." Swear on anybody, nothing can be more frightening than the fear of not living up to your parents' expectations (especially when you are a Mumma's boy).

Thank God, I managed to get into one of those colleges, a college which can give my parents something to boast about in society, thus sufficing their social needs and free



them from their worry about ‘*log kya kahenge*’.

The first day of college is like a tangle of emotions running inside. You are excited about being on your own, yet slightly nervous ‘for’ what awaits you, apart from being homesick.

Whole night, I kept imagining ‘HOW THE FIRST DAY AT COLLEGE IS GONNA BE?’ It was like a volcano of thoughts had erupted in my head. I couldn’t sleep, turning and tossing in my bed, waiting for dawn. I kept praying to all my favorite deities for a good start. It might sound funny, but I chanted *Hanuman Chalisa* twice, while trying to force myself to sleep. I guess it worked and somehow without realizing, I went into a deep slumber.

And there it was, the phone rang. As expected, it was *Maa*.

Don’t know how it is with moms. They just somehow, turn up on the right time. All thrilled and excited even more than me, *Maa* told me to wake up and get ready.

As always, she made it a point to give me her ever favorite advice, “Pray to God before you leave. This is a new beginning.” I have never understood, what instills so much faith in her.

But as usual, I didn’t argue with her.

It’s not that I don’t believe in God but I have always had issues with the typical Indian ways of worshipping them.

‘God is there, and you should thank him for all the good’ is what I have lived by.

Hanging up her call, I kicked Rohan, sleeping on the bed near the door.

Suddenly Rahul barged in our room asking, if we were ready.

For our first day of college – the Induction Day, the three of us were dressed in formals.

MCEMS’s 5 years integrated program was what, I was enrolled in for. And this 5 year journey was supposed to begin in next ten minutes.

After a hasty breakfast in the mess, we rushed towards the Quadrangle of our college. It was already pumped in with students from all over the country. We tried to stick together but soon we were divided into subgroups and sent to different classrooms for an ice-breaking session.

There I was, standing amongst a group of unknown faces, each one looking at the other with innocent eyes.

A young, tall, fair guy, whom I thought to be one of us, entered the room and introduced himself, “Hello, I am Christopher, you can call me Krishhh. I will be your conveyor for this session.”

“I will make it interesting for you guys, but try to put off those social masks that you all wear, and bring out the child in you. Remember this is a chance to know your buddies the way they are, make use of it, never in your life will you get another chance like this. One always treasures the moments he or she spends in college with his or her friends.

Today is your chance to make as many friends as you want. *Friendship* that would last a lifetime.”

The room was full of lovely young ladies. The wicked child in me wanted to know

**each and everything** about them, even the color of their lingerie.

I thought Krish intended a pun when he said that it's a chance to know your buddies. I felt good. I felt erotic.

Introductions started. As instructed, everyone introduced themselves as an animal which represents their characteristics closely. It was different from the typical introduction sessions I was accustomed to. Each and every intro was accompanied by giggles from the rest of the students. Krish made sure that it didn't get embarrassing for anyone. Marked with his witty remarks and pun, each student was introduced. Soon, the glass room was draped with heavy curtains, and lit with classy focus bulbs embedded in a wooden false-ceiling which gave a nice feel to the entire environ. Sitting on the cushioned mattresses lined up all along the three walls, totally at ease, resting on cushions, we started feeling as if we were amongst friends, we'd known for ages. That strangeness was gone. Krish sitting in front of us, resting on his knees over a pillow on the carpeted floor, made sure that we all interacted with every other person around.

Next, Krish formed groups of two. I was paired with a girl named Mahek.

She was so lively and full of life that she was energizing those standing in close vicinity to her. I kind of liked her nature. But she was not what I wanted and I was left appalled by my luck. While I was eyeing one of those hippie-hot-*tottas*, all I got was this simple, cute and chirpy girl, who will never even dare to wear a single-piece dress, even in my sexiest dream.

I was humming in my mind – ‘Oh dear, what a pity; this beauty would never go for nudity; so Lord, please save me from this humility’.

I thought, I deserved someone better and I was jealous of the guys who got what I wanted.

At the end of the session, Mahek was pally with almost everyone present in the room, while all I managed to do was to get introduced (that too lamely) to some of the ugliest of the creatures present in the room. I was green with envy.



It was end of July. And by this time, *Indra*, The Rain God, had already bestowed enough wrath on *Mumbaikars*. Mumbai can be quite messy during rainy season. It pours down like anything for days at a stretch. Unfortunately, it was the day when all hell broke on Mumbai, 26-7-2005, not to mention, it was also our first day of college. Never in our lives had we seen so much water pouring on Earth. It seemed as if one huge cloud had spawned over the whole of Mumbai.

Our sessions were halted in between and students were told to abandon college and proceed towards their hostels. But it was easier said than done. The water on the road was already above knee level. It was not possible to step out. It was still raining, high tide was scheduled for that evening and Juhu is a low lying area. All this left us with only one option and that was to camp in college till the condition improved.

Even after an hour, when the rains didn't stop, some of our hostel mates started to leave for the hostel. Rohan prompted, “Rahul, lets tag along with them, at least we will

reach home and will be able to sleep properly.”

I rejected the idea, “No way Rohan, have you gone bonkers. Just see the level of water outside the college and we don’t even know the route.”

Rahul intervened, “Common Raj, I know the way. Moreover I cannot sleep on this dirty floor, with all these creepy and slimy creatures crawling all over me,” the latter part was much stressed upon.

I argued for some more time, but eventually had to give up.

It was already dark when we left college. The other group had already gone. After taking a couple of turns here and there, we knew, we were lost.

Roads looked like rivers, open manholes were swallowing people like a giant demon. Amidst this, my eyes suddenly fell on a group of school kids who were struggling to hold on to a tree near-by, in an attempt to not get carried away with the gush of water. They were crying for help from the passersby, some of whom themselves were busy saving and looking for their loved ones and some who had come out of their houses to help people stuck in this havoc.

It felt like mayhem. Water was already touching our navel, added to that, the massive power cut had engulfed Mumbai in a sinister darkness. I felt helpless.

It seemed, Satan who always existed in the ‘Book of Job’ was rising.

I was afraid. We were afraid. There was no one who could help. Our one wrong decision was going to doom us to hell, it almost had; and I couldn’t even say – I told you so...

All our hopes died soon. They say, ‘hope dies last’, but I have always believed that when hope dies, God’s man arrive.

“Hey, what are you guys up to?” came a voice which was temperate, modest and wise.

We turned around to notice something which left our mouths wide open.

A man of a tall stature was standing in front of us. His face countenanced a reverent calmness which inspired in us, a feeling of both love and fear. We were not able to spot even a single wrinkle on his face. He supported a slender beard along with hair, which wavered and curled around his shoulder. His looks were both innocent and mature.

Mystified by his looks, we left each other’s hands we were holding since the time we were lost.

He spoke again. I literally shook my head to come back to reality, “Guys, I am talking to you. You need to find a place for yourself before you get drowned in this water.”

Rahul butted, “We are lost; we are new in the city and have nowhere to go. We are trying to find a place where we can spend this fucking night,” he almost cried midway. His guilt of forcing us was apparent on his face.

“Okay, do you guys mind if I help you find one,” I wanted to say yes, but was confused that whether or not, ‘Do Not Talk To Strangers’ rule set by my mom was applicable in such a precarious situation.

Ultimately, Rohan did it for me and we started following our savior.

Throughout the 5 minute walk we hardly spoke, I was still flabbergasted by the divine beauty which preceded us.

We reached a small church that was part of a convent school. We stood outside and watched our rescuer as he spoke to the father of the church.

He came back and delightfully announced, “Father has agreed to our request. He will get a classroom opened for us where we can sleep and provide us with food and some clothes.”

We thanked the Father and went inside.

After getting out of our completely soaked clothes and having the food provided by the church, we tried calling our homes to inform that we were safe, but it was of no use, the phone lines were jammed.

“Where do you guys stay?” he asked.

Rohan replied, “There is a hostel near the Sun and Sand beach, all three of us stay there.”

“Oh, that MCEMS hostel. So you are students of MCEMS, that’s great. What a coincidence I stay near that hostel. Your hostel is D Block House No 7 and my place is just next to H Block House No 11. You must visit me sometime.”

Their talks continued for some more time, but I was too tired to talk and dozed off unknowingly.



The next morning we got up late and that man had already left. As I woke up, the fury that the unusually incessant rain had brought, splashed in my mind. The hopelessness that I saw in the eyes of those school kids was something I was never gonna forget. Out from the school, they didn’t even know where they were and how, if at all they would ever get home. Their eyes full of fear, made me feel even more dreaded. I kept wondering whether or not they survived the night.

This instance brought me face to face with what we call, ‘the fury of nature’. As a kid, I always waited for the monsoons, those first showers, the smell of the wet mud, those small, river like streams that used to flow along the edge of the road, where I used to float my paper boats. Inviting all friends to come out of their houses and play in the rains always used to be the sweetest memory for me, till last night. The vagaries of those very rains, made my heart shrink now because of what all I witnessed the night before.

Luckily the rain had stopped and water had drained out. We thanked the father and left for our hostel. After reaching there, we came to know that the college is closed for the next two days. We were in no position to answer the endless questions that the fellow hostel mates had out of their concern. Also, we were worried about our parents back home, who would have been desperately seeking for a word from us about our well-being. But we had no way of reaching out to them, all phone lines and mobile connections were down. Our worn-out bodies needed some more rest, so we slept for the whole day.

Mumbai limped back to normalcy in a couple of days.

The college reopened. The rains had receded. Mumbai, known for its resilience was back in action.

*Sometimes, I wonder, what keeps this city going, no matter what test you put it through.*

Life continued normally, we made friends in college, we interacted with ugly looking dumb professors, we copied assignments, we eyed different girls though most of them were out of our reach, we partied hard in hostel, and we explored more and more of Mumbai.

We enjoyed our freedom. Living away from parents can be fun if you get to live in a metropolitan like Mumbai.

A few weeks passed.

On one lazy Sunday afternoon, we made a plan to go and meet the man who helped us find a shelter when we were struck in the rain. We reached the address he gave us but as soon as we got there, we were speechless.

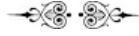
There was nothing there. No building, no house nearby, nothing. It was a vacant plot bounded by some broken fencing and some wild small shrubs surrounding it on all sides. In the middle, it hosted a small white dome with a Christian cross built within it. We reconfirmed the address but everyone directed us to the same place.

The instance just left us numb. A zillion thoughts stormed in our minds about this unusual event, yet we couldn't figure out what to do. So many unanswered questions about who he was, still rest within our souls.

*Were we really blind to not see God or we just got the wrong address?*

## Chapter 4

# Freedom at its Best – College Life



*Dil Chahta Hai,  
Kabhi Na Beete Chamkile Din,  
Dil Chahta Hai,  
Hum Na Rahe Kabhi Yaaron Ke Bin,  
Din Din Bhar Ho Pyaari Baatein,  
Jhoom Shaame Gaayen Raatein,  
Masti Mein Rahe Dooba Dooba Hamesha Sama,  
Hum Ko Raahon Mein Yunhi Milti Rahe Khushiyaan,  
Jagmagate Hain Jhilmilate Hain Apne Raaste,  
Yeh Khushi Rahe Roshni Rahen Apne Waaste,  
Jagmagate Hain Jhilmilaate Hain Apne Raaste,  
Yeh Khushi Rahen Roshni Rahen Apne Waaste,  
**Dil Chahta Hai... Dil Chahta Hai...!***

Routine college curriculum started. Lectures all day, one after another.

What I always yearned for as a kid... *College Life*, was right in front of me.

But who knew, this is what I had been dying for. One lecture to another, back to back, assignments galore, worksheets, blaaah... and more blaaah.

*'Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr... oh Lord, I need oxygen'.*

Considering the fact that you get the feel that, *'Okay, I have done it. I have achieved one half of the goal. I have fulfilled my parent's dream and here it is – the road ahead which would eventually lead me to become a-self made man,'* the initial days of routine lectures seem very thrilling and exciting.

Added pleasure comes from the new environment that you land up into – new people, new city, new friends and a totally new phase of the life – A total *'Nayi Zindagi'*.

It was like the metamorphosis from a chrysalis (pupa) that breaks the cocoon and comes out as a fully grown butterfly, out in this world to live on its own. Same way, it was a transmogrification from a young boy with dreams and aspirations to a self made man.

I was thrilled and excited, more so because... I was finally free.

Freedom to party, freedom to stay awake till late, freedom to spend without any explanation – in short, I was independent but still as dad always said – with freedom, comes responsibility.

I was free to do whatever I wanted to, but then, good or bad, I was responsible for both.

So, I was enjoying my un-enslaved sovereignty, yet totally ensuring not to cross my limits.

Unlike few, I knew where to draw a line and thus, was enjoying it the most.

After day long austerity of backbreaking, boring, lethally long and futile lectures, the entire evening was wasted in just coming out of that trauma. We used to sleep it all out.

And embrace ourselves for the '*Toofani Nights*'.

By 9 p.m. after dinner, every gang used to gather at the college gate, in the funkiest of attires, (Some catchy captioned tee with a pair of shorts topped with some cool converse), on the funkiest of the wheels (Every guy's first Love – His bike).

With the dream of a Bullet or a Royal Enfield in eyes, but pockets big enough only for a Passion; few took them on rent, few bought them second hand (perhaps the second-only second hand stuff, guys settled for; first being their girl friends); most who managed to borrow from seniors & yes of course, few *Ameer Baap ki Bigdi Aulaad*, bestowed with loads of golden pebbles from their forefathers. We all used to be all set for *the Big Bang...!*

One thing that always sets Mumbai apart from the rest – even a mere 20 bucks could get you enough to feed your stomach. Truly, this city has everything for everybody.

Roadside food at the *tapris* – Maggi which I bet can never get better than this, the Mumbai famous *vada pav*, *anda bhurji* and myriad varieties of *dosas*. My favorite of all used to be the *anda bhurji* and veg sandwiches, which no 5-star can ever match.

This used to be common amongst all, considering the fact that it used to be the best fit for our pockets.

Next on cards used to be – wandering on bikes, all across the suburbs in the middle of night. Our ever favorite hotspots used to be Carter Road, Bandra Link Road, Colaba & the evergreen Marine drive.

Then came the most inevitable part of every outing – Dare-drinking-session at our favorite, Asiad, Leopolds & Gokul. The only mandate to be a part of it was, 'drink till you drop'.

I was also a part of this coterie but never went so sloshed that I needed people to take me back. The most fun part of it was to watch people do crazy stuff after getting high. I swear, more than drinking, I enjoyed watching others get high.

Rohan, used to be the center of attraction after drinking. We deliberately used to make him drink loads, and then enjoy. His favorite act used to be going to anybody and everybody around, hugging them tightly, saying his patent after 12 dialogue – "*Yaara, tu hi mera bhai hai.*"

The culmination of these fun filled night outs often used to be marked by sitting by the

sea in a large group, under the starry sky amidst the music of striking high tides splashing drops of water at us – A Priceless Pleasure.

At times, we would find ourselves sitting all quiet, gazing at the torrent waves come and go, and retrospect our lives. Someone would start with his past life, love-hate relationships, fights with parents, future dreams, and the others would just relate with it.

At times, silence used to break between us, because of somebody going out all *senti* and then one of us putting an end to all the *sentiya* saying our mantra:

*“Who gives a fuck about the Past,  
Who knows how long will the future Last;  
Present is present right here,  
Why don't we have a Blast...!”*

Yet another, important aspect of college life – FRIENDSHIP.

From the very beginning, I made a place for myself amongst a group of friends apart from Rohan and Rahul, with whom I used to spend all day.

The initial days were oriented towards academics. We used to attend all lectures religiously, being before time for almost every class and then taking notes and listening attentively to the teachers. But then, how long that goes *haan*?

If we would have continued that way, there would have been no difference between ‘The School’ and college.

So, soon, the focus shifted towards what we call, real college.

It began with saying goodbye to attention in the boring lectures. The bugging, jarring voice of the professors had by now become a torture to our eardrums.

Taking notes was now the forte of a few idiots who used to rush early for lectures just to grab the front rows, who would not even take a breath before they would jot down every word that came out of the professor's blabbering mouth.

We had found our own ways to kill time during those long sessions. But the run to reach early in class was still there, though now it was to get hold of the last benches, unlike those *chatur*s in the class.

Doodling all along, taking panoramic shots of everything around, especially the ones doing weird things in the class, only to mock them later by posting it on Facebook, used to be our mantra. Open laptops used to serve as hideouts, to our sleep drenched drooping heads or playing cricket, NFS, Counter strike used to be our way to kill time.

At times, the wicked monsters in us used to go for a hunt, only to enter into a squabble with the nagging professors. Our lot used to love this the most. Challenging the words and ideologies of the professor, backed with the theories which were so irrefutably concocted, that even the lecturer himself used to get trapped in his own words.

Icing on the cake used to be when the *chatur*s made futile efforts to counter our comments, and thus used to bear the brunt of our agony and frosty stares.

But then, all this never used to get reflected in our grades. We used to study more by ourselves. Thus, we enjoyed and yet topped.



An interesting part of this new life was, the fun filled long gossip sessions that used to mark the beginning of every night at the hostel. What every male on this planet does is castigate women and girls for their habit of gossiping, but I would make an honest confession – ‘We boys are no less.’

If girls gossip all day, we boys do it all night.

Each night used to begin with gathering all friends together in a room, sitting over drinks and the only interesting topic of discussion being – ‘Cricket’ or the ‘Girls’ around. From the ugliest to the prettiest, each girl was discussed in detail – details, that even girls wouldn’t know about themselves. From their sizes and curves to their private garments, everything was discussed.

By everything I mean everything, even their cycle. Period.



“Rahul, Rohan, how much have you guys completed?” asking hurriedly, I barged into Rahul’s room.

“Nothing much dude, I have just completed 40% of the syllabus,” Rohan promptly replied.

But, the question wasn’t actually intended for him. I actually wanted to know it from Rahul.

As expected and anticipated, Rahul tried every bit, not to respond to my question directly.

EXAMS – That time when every friendship goes through the crudest of tests. No matter how good or close friends you have been, there is always a corner in your heart that aches when your friend scores more than you.

One may claim proudly that friendship is over and above every materialistic thing but the truth is something else.

We all, some or the other time say it to our friends, ‘I am very happy for you’, but the truth is, ‘I am happy for you only until what you have got is either not what I wanted or I already have’.

Even when we go by the highest of standards of true friendship, then in a euphemistic manner we can say – ‘We may not feel bad that our friend has got something, but yes, it certainly hurts that we don’t have it’. This basic truth still holds true.

With Rohan, I never felt any sort of discomfort ever, because I knew he wasn’t much into academics and not even a ‘marks chaser’. He was too laid back when it came to academics.

Unlike that, Rahul and I were like two hungry dogs, who wanted to grab the same piece of bone. This fierce was our competition.

I would humbly admit, ‘yes, I was a rat-race runner, who just wanted to reach the epitome’ and mind it – there can only be one person at the top.

Rahul’s intentions were no different than mine and we were both, aware of this unspoken tussle, but at the same time we were friends and always stood by each other, against all odds.

The semester exams went pretty well for me. I was hoping for the results to come out soon. Unfortunately, luck didn't favor me. By a slight margin, Rahul defeated me and stood first.

I was upset for having got the second place.

Where all students were happy to just have cleared all the papers, I was dejected and utterly frustrated because Rahul outscored me.

Rohan came running and hugged both of us. He was elated by the fact that he didn't get 'KT' in Mechanics paper, which was the most dreaded nightmare for the entire batch.

He congratulated both of us with equal zeal. Rahul too congratulated me with a huge smile on his face, but I swear on anybody, it felt like Bryan Adams singing right over my head, *'It cuts like a knife'*, and by no means, *'It felt alright'*.

After a few days, I came out of my grief and bounced back to the normal-me, but the fire within me hadn't blown off. There was still some spark left within the ashes, which was all set to re-ignite with a slight blow and burn everyone close... 'Burn Rahul Away'.



When you are successful, all the right things come your way, on the right time.

Same thing happens when you top the college. All students and professors start going 'GA-GA' about you. Students keep hinting at you when you cross by the corridor, teacher quote you as an example to others. Trust me, you become bigger than a Superstar.

But this time, it wasn't me.

It was Rahul, and I was utterly J about it.

I was worst struck when all the hot chicks went running towards him and congratulated. Chicks – whom Rahul, even in his wildest of dreams couldn't have thought of having spoken to, were running to him. Though, everybody knew the real motive behind the swarm of bees which were clinging onto Rahul but still it was pricking every eye.

The limit of injustice, by God, was crossed when Preeti came and hugged Rahul.

Preeti, the hottest chick in the entire college, the dame who used to be the apple of every eye. The kind of girl I always wanted to be with.

During my private moments, I always used to picture Preeti lying bare bodied on a beach with only a sarong covering her, and no matter how hard I tried, I always passed out before I could remove it from her body. In an ideal scenario, 11 minutes is what it takes to get a guy aroused, but she could make you pass out in less than 11 seconds.

To my horror, within a few days, Rahul and Preeti were an item of sorts.

They were committed to each other.

It felt like all the things that I wanted from life were being snatched away and that too, by Rahul.

My dreams, my life, my happiness were just slipping off my hands and I was just watching it all go away. I felt like a complete loser.

But, then somehow I consoled myself saying, 'You can't always get what you want',

and the inner agony and fire within me, made me stronger to fight back and wait for the day when destiny will favor me and ordain all the right things my way, and I would say, *'It is my day, Today'*.



Electronics was the subject I always liked. It intrigued me from the very first day. It was perhaps the only subject that reflected a 100% attendance in front of my name.

As a part of the sem-2 projects, I needed a partner. We could only do the project in groups of two. My electronics lecturer, Mr. Tripathi, specially motivated me saying that he wanted me to come up with something great and had huge expectations from me.

Dr. Tripathi was 64 years old. He lived on the funda of 'simple living, high thinking'. He had retired a few years back, but being a man totally dedicated to his subject, he took an extension for another 2 years and continued teaching. He was paid some token money as gratitude, but not salary because officially he couldn't be on a proper payroll. But money wasn't why he wanted to work, nor was it because he was a workaholic. He did it to just pass his day, unlike the usual people of his age, who would sit back home, do house hold routine tasks and bring up grandchildren from their schools and do all the market related jobs. He wasn't a man whom I can imagine ever sitting back at home.

He was a man inundated with immense knowledge, not only about his subject, but almost everything. One thing we were all amazed by was his extremely sharp memory. Even at the age of 64, he could outshine any 20 year old with his memory and general knowledge.

He wasn't though, a family man. At the early age only, to support his family, he started working. But he never wanted his studies to take a backseat. So he used to take evening school and work all day in a library.

His penchant for studying and his rational bent of mind would never let him be at peace. He would always try to figure out the logic behind things and keep on experimenting with stuff. That's how I guess people born to become scientists are like.

He was so much into his research and projects during his early 20s that he never realised the importance of social needs and customs. All he knew was – his research and the thirst to prove his theories. Time flew and so did his age. But he never regretted a smidge for having lost at that front.

As he once quipped while delivering a speech.

"People say, I should have got married, should have got kids, so that when I am old, which is now, there would have been someone to take care of me; but who says I never got married."

"I fell in love.

I fell in love with my work."

"As much as I loved gaining knowledge, I loved even more sharing it with others. That's how, teaching became my first and only love."

"Coming to kids... well, being a father to a single kid, who might have rendered me alone in an old age home, when I would have become more of a parasite for him, I guess

I am better off being a father to so many kids like you, who love me unconditionally.”

He was a man, with a huge aura.

Tripathi Sir were loved and respected by all students.

I personally was very much attached to him. He had been a fatherly figure for me. There were so many instances which I shared with him, things that I couldn't share with my own dad.

We were bonded somehow.

He always had some inclination towards me. I could see at times in his eyes and feel from his words, that he wanted me to become big some day. At times, he even used to tell people that he admired me a lot.

During my lows, he used to pep me up, hold me when I fell and fill in me the zeal to resurrect from ashes and fight back.

Just his words were enough to make me think that I could achieve whatever I wanted.

But then, single handedly, I couldn't have sailed through. I approached Rahul. However, like all cupid struck boys, he had become useless, running all day behind his girl. He refused, saying that he had to help Preeti with her project.

Another option was Rohan, a guy who could have given his life for friendship, but academic favors, was not his cup of tea.

I was upset and disheartened. I needed a partner who had good knowledge of the subject.

Rohan must have gone and babbled it out in front of Preeti. In the dark tunnel, which was eating me up, came a ray of light – Preeti.

No, she didn't pair up with me for the project. Even if she would have offered, I would have refused myself, considering the fact that behind those deadly looks was a dead dumb brain.

Luckily, she told me that a friend of hers is also looking for a group partner.

Initially, I was skeptical but then Preeti convinced me that her friend was very good at academics and somehow I gave in. I had to; I didn't have any options anyway.

Preeti told me that it was Mahek.

“Mahek,” I exclaimed.

“Is she the same girl, with whom I was paired in the ice breaker?” I wondered.

Next morning, I went to the economics class and after the class, went up to Mahek to talk about the same. But before I could go and say a word, she turned and said, “Hi, Raj.”

“So, are you ready to make it big.”

I was taken aback for a moment.

Just like the first meeting, she was all peppy and energetic.

Her face was utter pink and eyes full of sparkle. Something was unusually good about her. The awkward feeling that I had about working with her was gone because she just broke the ice between us. She told me to meet her the next day in the library to discuss about the project.

Going back to my room, I was relieved and was hoping for things to work out with

Mahek so that we could come up with the best project. I wanted to prove my mettle and more so I wanted to do justice to the huge expectations Sir had from me.



It was finally the D day, the day when our efforts and hard work were expected to payoff. The symposium on our projects began. External faculties were there to judge us. A panel of five faculties was there to assess our work.

Mahek came rushing towards the cafeteria that morning. She just barged in and said, “Raj, ours is the first”.

I just felt that the land below my feet was suddenly ripped apart and I was about to sink in.

“Whaaaat the F...,” I shouted.

“Yes, Raaaaaj, go and change your attire. Dress up in your formals and reach the auditorium,” she spoke hurriedly, pulling my hand to make me get up from the breakfast table.

Without wasting a minute I ran back to my room.

*‘But, if I travel to the end of rainbow, as Dame Fortune did intend, Murphy would be there to tell me – The pot’s at the other end’.*

I suddenly realised that I hadn’t shaved for almost a week. Then, I started hunting for my stuff in the room. Tie was somewhere, socks were elsewhere. It was a total ruckus. But somehow, I managed to get dressed and reach the auditorium.

Mahek was sitting there, revising the contents. She was very nervous. I could see that nerve of tension on her face. She just looked at me and we made eye contact.

She held my hand and said, “Raj, I want to make it big. Can we do it?”

“Common buddy, let’s just rip everyone apart. We would win and we have to win,” my words were full of rage and confidence. It helped her get her tempo back.

We both listened to the opening speeches. Then came our turn. Our names were called out. We both got up and began to move towards the dice.

Just a sec before starting, Mahek looked at me. I just murmured, “We will do it Mahek. Best of Luck. Go ahead.”

And thus she started with the addressing speech. Soon, that jitter was gone and we both were totally engrossed in the presentation. We explained each and every concept along with the demo.

Mahek was prolific at her presentation skills. The awesome start that she gave, made my confidence grow stronger. And soon, it was over.

We were done with the presentation.

It’s hard to explain how much relief that last slide of the presentation gives you – ‘The, Thank-You slide’.

Now was the bigger fury though, the Q&A round. We were both thrilled and confident and took every question on dart and tackled it.

Thereafter, we didn’t even pay a smidge of attention to what others were saying. I just rested on my seat and told Mahek, “You were fab. You gave a terrific start to our

presentation. I think we have left the judges spellbound.”

“So were you Raj,” she smiled.

I was extremely tired and bored by the time the last presentation started.

Dr. Tripathi came to give his speech and post that the results were to be announced.

It ran a cold shiver across me. Suddenly, all the laziness vanished and I was sitting upright. Geared up for the result, a part of me was little scared, though a part was confident about our being the best. It was an ensemble of feelings, shaking me from within.

Mahek was equally nervous and it was evident from her face. Her face had turned red from the usual pink.

Soon, the moment came. I closed my eyes and took God’s name. I kept murmuring, “God please be with me today. If I have ever done something good, pay me the fruits for it today by letting me win.”

Suddenly, with the noise of claps and a huge shout, Dr. Tripathi announced, “And the Best project was by – Mahek and Raj.”

For a minute, I was shocked and numb. Soon it sank in. Mahek was elated. She just hugged me and we proceeded towards the stage. The crowd was screaming. Rohan just came running and pounced on me. Rahul shook hands and congratulated me. The feeling that I had at that moment is inexplicable.

It took a little while to sink in.

Then came, even bigger news.

The panel also had someone from a popular business magazine, ‘Business Era’. They had come to attend the event because they needed to shortlist 10 projects from colleges all over the country.

And here it was, my project got selected for it.

Man, I was on cloud nine. Finally, it was my time. It felt like the jinx was broken. I was happy, I was thrilled and so was Mahek. Though I would never want to admit it, but it was true, she proved to be lucky for me. The lady luck worked for me.

It was party time.

After the function got over, my eyes kept hunting for Sir, but I couldn’t find him anywhere. I just wanted to rush to him and see his reaction.

Later I even inquired at the reception but the staff there told me that Sir had left for home. He usually left by the 5 p.m. bus. And, today also he had left as per his routine.

Victory it was, and trust me, winning is the only thing that matters, no matter how much we console ourselves by saying at least we tried and all. Ultimately, people remember only the winner.

As they say and I always believed, *‘Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander’*.

## Chapter 5

# ‘Next Sachin in the Making’ – Cricket Tournament



***Cricket in India – Was, Is and perhaps will always be the only religion for all. And, in Sachin – We all see a God.***

*No matter which country it is, no matter what ground it is, no matter who the opponent is; when Sachin is on field, every Indian heart, beats in sync; every soul says only one prayer and every mouth screams only one name: ‘Sachiiiiin... Sachiiiiiiiiinnnnn’!*

*Cricket spreads in the air. Cities come to a stop. Traffic comes to a halt. Streets are abandoned. Offices get vacated early. Every person reaches for a TV in vicinity. People stop wherever they are. All relatives come together. From the eldest to the youngest, in a spur, generations come together. Men of the family cling to the remote. Ladies wind up their routine chores. Kids throw away the books and wear team jerseys to copy players’ looks. A rush of patriotism flows down every soul. That’s a match day, in India.*

*Every boy from 6 to 18, day and night sees only one dream – ‘One day, I will play like Sachin’.*

*And so did I.*



“Raj, we have to pull it off. It’s the quarter final match. We cannot afford to lose it, not at this stage,” Adi said.

He was the captain of my team, but such words only increase the pressure, especially when you have to score 15 runs of the last 6 balls.

I felt a twitch inside me, ogled at him, and replied, “We will do it, Adi. Just believe in yourself.”

The sidelines of Ritumbara ground were besieged with students, who had bunked their classes to come and watch the two toughest teams play.

I was nervous.

The fact that I was batting on 53, helped a bit, but then cricket is a pressure game, one who handles the pressure well becomes a hero, and others end up as a chocker – something that I never wanted to be.

I desperately wanted to come out as a hero and leave a mark on those searing beauties of the college who went crazy for the mightiest of the players.

I faced the fiery first delivery.

I managed to get it on the sweet spot of my bat and the ball raced straight through. Long on managed to cut it off, but he could not stop us from taking 2 runs.

Next ball was a slow bouncer.

I swung the bat with all my strength. I wanted to pull the ball, but all I managed was an edge. Luckily for us, ball went over the wicket keeper's head and reached the boundary within no time.

Adi came walking towards me and said, "C'mon Raj, you are doing great."

I scoffed.

After conniving a strategy with his captain, the bowler went to his bowling mark.

I wanted to outwit them. I started thinking about the next ball. Somehow, I had preempted that the upcoming ball would be a slow yorker. At the back of my mind I knew that I was going to take a big risk by stepping down but it was necessary as the loss of a single ball would have strangled us to defeat.

Things went as planned and I took the yorker on the full and struck it with my entire valor.

It went for a six.

I pumped my fist in the air. I knew we were close, thus tried to maintain my composure by taking in some deep breaths.

A wave of silence had engulfed the howling crowd. The ground which was busting with noise minutes ago, was silent, waiting for the next ball.

The equation – 3 balls, 3 runs.

Very much gettable.

I smashed the fourth delivery towards the third man and took a single to get Adi on strike.

Next ball was effortlessly put away for a four.

*We won...!*

Carving our way into the semi finals, we had pulled a victory out of nowhere. Defeating winners of last year was an achievement for our team.

My passion for cricket got its worth.

Standing in the middle of the ground, I was waiting for the girls to just pounce on me and line up to take my autograph.

As expected, it happened exactly as I had 'not' expected. However, some of the really hot chicks of my college did walk up to me to congratulate. One frenzied fan even pulled my cheeks.

I saw Rahul eying me with those envious eyes. Congratulating me, he said, "Gear up for the next, because it's against the Best."



Semifinal was a big match. Not because it was the road to the finals but because, it was against the ‘Self proclaimed – Best’.

I could still hear those challenging words of Rahul.

I had invited many girls (almost all of them were fuming hot) on the ground to support me and most of them didn’t turn down my offer. I was happy.

Finally, I was a popular face in college and just like Rahul, I too had backing of girls.

The match started.

Rahul’s team won the toss and decided to bat.

That day, our bowling didn’t click and runs rained cats and dogs, but for the opponents.

Adi furiously kept shouting on the team members, he yelled at almost everybody out of frustration.

All our moves and strategies were failing. God was on Rahul’s side. He was at his best and scored 75 runs before getting out. Never before, I had seen him bat like that; guess that day, he had discovered the soul of batting – the balance between elegance and power.

The onus was on me now. I had to outperform him.

Our innings started. As always, I opened with Nitesh.

Our partnership went on for some 75 odd runs before Nitesh got out on an in-swinging good length delivery. The next three batsmen scored a duck each and deserted the pitch within no time.

Adi was next to walk in.

Our team members and supporters were hoping to see yet another winning knock from the two of us. We started playing cautiously and were getting runs in ones and twos.

At that stage losing a wicket would have meant a sure shot loss.

We cruised along and gradually, ones turned into fours and twos turned into sixes.

The target which once seemed to be a farfetched dream suddenly seemed very much achievable.

When all their plans to get us out failed, Rahul started sledging. He was keeping the wickets, which gave him that extra opportunity to direct sledges at the batsmen.

I kept ignoring him and tried to maintain my temper.

When the equation came to run-a-ball, I turned back and smirked. Rahul too nodded and passed a cynical smile.

The next time I came on strike, Rahul signaled the umpire and went to the boundary to fetch his helmet. The umpires called for the much needed drinks break. I saw Rahul whispering something to somebody in the crowd.

The match resumed and just as I was going to attempt a shot at a top spinning delivery, the crowd started to howl *Mahek*’s name.

I was astounded by the sudden mention of Mahek’s name.

I completely missed the shot.

The shrieking of the crowd from that corner was getting louder and I kept on mistiming my shots.

Baffled completely, I couldn't keep my cool and aggressively progressed towards Rahul.

Had Adi not come in between that day, I would have burst open Rahul's head with my bat.

I abused him and got the same in return, but I did see that horrified look in his eyes for a second and that was good enough to calm me down.

The game resumed.

I had lost my focus.

And the result – I got bowled to a full toss while trying to hit it out of the park.

Rahul got what he wanted. He got me out, and his team was back in the game.

While making my way out of the ground, I kept cursing myself for falling out to that devil's trick.

I don't know what irked me – was it that I had a soft corner for Mahek, or was I chagrined because linkage with Mahek was belittling my chances at other girls.

At the boundary line I kept praying, while at the pitch, Adi kept on patiently knocking the deliveries for some cheeky singles. His strategy worked and we won the match by a whisker.

Although we won the match, I was still pissed at Rahul.

I realised something was causing discomfort.

He was my school friend; we had been sharing a common class for as long as 12 years, but the devil in me was craving for more, and in that moment I just wanted to burn him down to ashes. As my rage trounced my sanity, I started looking for Rahul, and behold was he standing, with his head hung low and Preeti by his side.

I called his name aloud, "Rahul." I wanted people to notice me.

"Cheer up man, you played well but we were always a team *far better than the Best*."

I saw him turning red. I knew that he got the sarcasm.

I continued, "And yes, you shouldn't have sledged, who knows you could have won, had you been true to yourself."

Once done with them, I went to the team party where I got sloshed.



After the semifinals, people in the college started to link me with Mahek.

I always knew that she was not my kinda girl, but at times when people start questioning your fairness, you tend to become over fair. So was the case with me, I started avoiding coming face to face with her and giving people a chance to play their favourite linking game, but all I managed to do was to think even more about her.

Gradually, her name became a sort of slow poison for me and it started affecting my cardiovascular system. It became difficult for me to shun away her thoughts, but my longing for her presence increased, day in and day out.

I started hanging around with her more often. Every time it was me who came up with

some irrefutable reason that compelled her to accompany me.

But somewhere deep within, I tried to abstain myself from falling for her.

*Love is an evil;*

*You love somebody, you get hurt. Not to get hurt, you abstain from love.*

*But, you love to be loved.*

*So, you are left with two options – Either, get hurt, not loving or Love, getting hurt.*



Final match was to be played under the lights, ensuring the presence of entire college.

I could see those lovely young faces all around the ground, some familiar, some alien.

Differences between Rahul and I were also sorted out and our friendship was back on track and hitting a new high.

Perhaps, that's what makes school friends so special, one moment you fight and the very next moment you become so called 'Chuddy-Buddies'.

All three of them, Rohan along with Rahul and Preeti were present on the ground to cheer for me.

I had invited Mahek, but wasn't sure if she would come, as her parents didn't allow her to step outside the house past 10 o'clock.

Nevertheless, I was still hoping against all hopes that my hopeful eyes will get a glimpse of her.

Somehow, it didn't feel right. Somehow, something was missing... without her. Somehow...

Since childhood, cricket had been my passion. Today, it was almost like a dream come true, I was at this final juncture of victory. But at this crucial moment, my focus was somewhere else.

Cricket is a religion to me and I am its ardent follower.

But that day, I was missing someone.

I was missing 'Mahek'.

Finals appeared to be a walk in the park. We won the toss and elected to bat. The wicket was dry, no grass, and no cracks, whatsoever. Perhaps, it was prepared for a batting side like us.

First innings went exactly as we had wanted.

I along with Nitesh had given a mammoth target of 250 runs to the opponents.

It was one of the largest opening partnerships and the maximum runs scored by any team on that ground.

We just had to play our natural game to pick up the Trophy.

But, that day, the blocks didn't fall right, 20 minutes into the drinks and I was into my wicket keeper kit, my team was already on the ground.

Just as I was going to walk onto the field, I saw Mahek coming.

For a minute, I thought I was hallucinating.

I closed my eyes and shook my head to disrupt her image off my retina.

"What's up buttercup? Best of luck, for your match."

Finding it hard to come out with words I said, “Hey.”  
“By the way, I saw you shaking your head, you okay no?”  
Thank God, I recovered soon.  
“Yeah, I am fine. But, how did you manage to sneak out?”  
“Only for you, baby.”  
It hit me hard.  
Was she flirting with me?  
I skipped a beat.  
“If that’s the case, I guess I will have to win this match for you.”  
We flirted on FB frequently, but this was the first time we were doing it face to face.  
The feeling was enticing, I wanted to continue, but umpires made their way onto the ground, which meant I had to rush in too.  
“Raj, I think, you should go now,” she held me by my elbow and pushed me towards the ground.  
Her touch ensured that I lost all my marbles.  
She shouted from behind, “And yeah, I have taken permission for a night out today, only for your victory bash.”  
“Whaaaat?”  
She winked, “Yes.”  
My mind went numb.  
A state of catatonia imbibed me, unable to speak, think or respond I went and stood up to the stumps. As always, I took my stance slightly outside the line of off-stump.  
First two balls were watchfully defended by the batsmen.  
Pressure of the colossal total, forced the batsmen to step out to the third ball of the match, had my senses been in my control, it would have been an easy stumping, but that was not the case.  
Within no time, the ball at its fierce velocity rushing towards the batsmen, somehow went past him and hit me on my face, with its enormous impulse.  
For a minute, things went blank in front of me and I fell on the ground.  
A few seconds and as I flickered my eyes open, everything turned red around me.  
The impact made my upper lip split into two. The sensation around the area of impact was gone. I could not feel anything. All I could see was blood dripping on the ground.  
People gathered around me and started analyzing the depth of my wound. It was decided that I was to be taken to the hospital.  
Mahek quickly took out her car and I along with Rohan and Rahul sat inside it.  
We reached hospital.  
The dizziness caused due to the loss of blood ensured that I lost any memory of the time spent in ICU.  
I got, as many as seven stitches on my upper lip.



For the next few days, I was on a liquid diet as my stitches needed time to heal.

All three – Rohan, Rahul and Preeti were there. And yes, Mahek too, till the time I got discharged from the hospital.

Mahek kept coming to my hostel with all sorts of freshly prepared homemade juices, starting from apple juice and ending at juice made of bitter gourd.

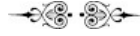
*God, I so hated her when she forcibly made me drink it.*

I bunked college for a few days and so did she. I was happy that I was getting this opportunity to spend time with her.

Only worry, I would be left with a scar on my face.

## Chapter 6

# Love Just Happened... with Mahek



Like always we all decided to hang out for a whole day. We all needed a break from the routine hectic classes and the drudgery during the exams.

But, all the fellows were deep asleep. I went to Rahul's room to see if he was up. I guess, I was wrong to even have thought that, after a party like last night and the way we drank – as if, it was our last day on Earth and it was the last time we were drinking. If I remember correctly, each fellow almost had, as we say – *Khamba*.

So, although I tried, Rahul was not ready to wake up, to be precise, he wasn't in a state to wake up.

I went back to my room and saw Mahek online.

I was excited and I pinged her.

I admit, I had always loved talking to her. She had something, I don't know what, but it had always been a delight talking to her.

After the routine casual talks here and there, I asked her, "Mahek, what's your plan for the day?"

She promptly replied, "Nothing as of now. Mom, Dad are out for some function and I am getting bored."

"Let's go out today – first movie, then dinner. What say?"

"Who all Raj?"

I, as always at my flirting best, quipped, "You and me only. If you don't want anybody else, I don't mind."

She just shied away and said, "I never meant so."

"Why, am I that bad that you would not want to come for a movie with me? Mahek, I am a safe guy," I replied, trying to be naughty with her.

Difficult to reason out, but I was trying to gauge her.

It had been sometime that I had developed an unusual liking for her. She had been such a nice friend, always. Had always stood by me, done so much for me. The way she took care of me during the time I was recovering from my injury is something I would never forget all my life.

Honestly, she wasn't the kind of girl, I always ran after. She had been a total opposite

of that.

Simplicity, not only in her dressing, but in her personality. As a person, Mahek was a girl who lived life on her own terms. She was a girl with a good intellect, very smart, hard working and immensely talented. Reading, writing, painting, singing – she was great at everything.

She had been the kind of person that everyone around would have liked, in the sense of her courteous behavior, her nice attitude. Always helping others and doing things for friends. She was very pretty, but her beauty as a person was what made her stand out amongst all other chicks... who would flaunt their girly charms, jazzy make-ups; enticing guys around with their short skirts and deep neck cuts, to drive the crowd towards them.

Quite contrary to my nature as well, I liked her simplicity – always saying whatever was on her mind, not like the ones who say something, and mean something else.

May be, I too was like that.

She liked people who were transparent in their thoughts and relations. She had that magic that brought out all the goodness in me as well.

I was not the same Raj; I was different.

One thing that could never go unnoticed about her was her ever smiling, chirpy and jovial nature. Liveliness is what she used to bring about all around.

Always talkative, so much that at times we all used to ask her to try and keep shut for a minute at least once in a day.

And I don't know why? How?

But I liked her.

I liked being with her.

I liked everything about her.

Mahek took a while and then agreed. I told her to reach campus by afternoon and meanwhile I booked tickets online for all five of us: Rohan, Rahul, Preeti, Mahek and myself.

And thus the plan was set.

She reached campus and called us all. Preeti got her car and we all somehow managed to squeeze in her new Fabia.

Strangely perhaps; I wanted Mahek to sit next to me.

She was all busy quipping and as always, gossiping with Rohan and Preeti. I was a little lost. My mind was somewhere else. I wanted to be the focus of her attention.

It's just the kind of feeling that when you like someone, you want that person to give you all the importance. I was feeling a little uneasy amidst turmoil of such thoughts boggling my mind, when suddenly Mahek asked, "What happened Raj, you seem a little lost."

But, by the time I could even open my mouth to answer, the devils around: Rohan, Rahul and the biggest of them all – Preeti, screamed in a teasing tone, "Mahek, what to tell you, where is Raj lost these days. He is no more our Raj, he is some different Raj."

Somehow, this was tickling me from within. It was a soothing sensation on one side, but it was irritating too. Though it may sound absolutely stupid but whatever was going

on inside me was something I didn't understand.

Perhaps, the Cupidity bug had bitten me.

Thus they went on and on, teasing and pulling my leg.

When suddenly Mahek said, "May be Raj didn't like that I came," in her ever so dramatic way.

Girls somehow are too adept at being the biggest *nautankis*. The second thing, they are best at. Guess, first is universally known to all.

Rohan popped up saying, "Mahek, you don't know how much Raj wanted you to come. How good you are, somebody should ask Raj."

I was getting embarrassed, thinking what would Mahek think and was worried, that she might feel bad and get offended by all this. The fear of losing her was building in me.

Strangely, when Rohan passed this remark, being at his sadistic best, to see me in trouble, Mahek had a different smile on her face. She was blushing and in a shy tone, cutely said, "Is it so, Raj. I never knew that."

I was amazed to see her reaction. It felt nice.

I wanted to see her reaction and unknowingly though, Rohan had helped me get it out of her.

Raj – the dude, as I always proclaimed myself to be was helpless and scared to play his cards. It had never happened with me before; I knew my way around with girls, but with Mahek, it was different. I was worried and I was scared.

So here I was, all cheered up now and suddenly I came back in form, all happy, and the turmoil within me eloped.

We entered the movie theatre. With tickets in my hand, I was leading the whole group towards our seats. I always had this thing in me that whenever I had to go for movies, I always preferred centre corner seats. No matter how the movie is, if I don't get my desired seats, it takes half the pleasure away.

Rahul immediately took the seat next to Preeti, as expected. But one unexpected thing happened. Rohan went and took the seat next to Mahek.

That moment, I wanted genes within me to mutate to those of Cyclops, and burn Rohan down with a beam of concussive, ruby-colored force from my eyes.

Gaining control on my irked nerve, I asked him once, "Rohan, can you come to this side, I want to sit there. You know *na*, I always prefer the corner seat."

Rohan out rightly refused, "What Dude, don't be a whackadoo. Go and sit at the other end next to Rahul."

I sluggishly moved but how could I let go off the golden chance. I texted him to vacate the seat.

He immediately started giggling and got up from his seat and left for getting some snacks.

My track was clear and I was all set to go. I popped up from my seat and grabbed the mighty place – next to Mahek. It was like something was pushing me towards her.

The movie began but soon I found myself totally uninterested in the movie.



Not that the movie was bad, but what all was going on, on-reel, was what I wanted to happen in-real. My fantasies were getting on to a new high. A rush of hormones began to ooze in me. Someway, I was caught in an amygdale hijack.

I kept staring at Mahek, her every action, her every expression.

My mind was caught in a weird labyrinthine – ‘Is it? Is it not? If it is, then how come? Should I? Or shouldn’t I?’ Kept on taking a toll on me. I was caught amidst a quandary. One half of me was getting pulled towards Mahek and the other half refrained me from taking the leap.

I just closed my eyes for a minute. Took some deep breaths and began to think. What’s happening to me? Then suddenly the lights turned on.

### ‘Intermission’

Rahul and Preeti rushed out to grab a bite while Rohan was sitting and started chatting with Mahek.

I immediately prompted, “What Rohan. You don’t wanna have anything? Why don’t you go and get some cold drinks”.

“Naaah, I don’t want to have it Raj,” he replied.

Rohan at that point of time seemed like a devil after my life, as they say *kabaab mein haddi*. I just wanted some private time with Mahek but that jerk, wasn’t ready to understand what I wanted.

Irritated, I said, “Rohan, go get some nachos and a coke for me then.”

By Gods grace, Rohan without much ado, left.

Taking a sigh of relief, I asked Mahek, “How are you finding the movie. I am getting so bored.”

“Bored? No Raj the movie is so interesting. It’s such a cute love story,” she said

“Oh, is it? Yeah may be, but who’s watching the movie anyways,” I said, giving her a coquettish wink.

Mahek had a kittenish smile on her face when she said, “Why? What are you doing, if not watching the movie? I can make out that your focus is somewhere else. Do you wanna talk about it?” she said in a cute chirpy tone, caressing my cheek a little.

Heavenly, it felt. Mahek and I had been friends for quite some time now, but never did her touch ever felt the way it did in that moment. It caused numerous vibrations rise from the center of my body, to flow all across it.

“It has got to be one big dumbass to watch a movie, when *you* are sitting so close,” I said in a soft whisper. Mahek immediately shied and broke the eye contact with me.

Looking down she said, “Oh c’mon Raj, Watch it for my sake. One more hour to go.”

“Mahek, I want to...,” amassing full courage I was just about to pour my heart out, when three of them came back.

Suddenly, all the courage I had mustered, crashed.

Movie started and I thought I should wait, maybe.

The movie ended and we all decided to go to ‘Jazz by the Bay’. Blue ambience, pool side, dimly lit atmosphere was just what I wanted.

We all took seats next to a small fountain. Soft music in the background and Mahek in front of me, is all I wanted.

I deliberately grabbed the seat right in front of her. The shadow of the candle lamp in the middle of the table enhanced the glow on her face. She looked like a serene angel. Her black eyes gleamed and looked even more enticing. I was quiet and was just gazing at her, lost in my own world I just couldn't take my eyes off her face.

She was being as caring as she had always been. Asking me a couple of times, what would I have and all.

That was the time my inner voice was taking plunges to my throat. Words were just waiting to pop out from my mouth but getting stuck at my tongue.

I was in love. I just wanted to tell her.

It was a karaoke night that day at Jazz. One of the guys got up and took over the dice to sing '*Nothing is gonna change my love for you baby*', for his newly wedded bride.

It was exactly what I was feeling in that moment, the other guy just said it for me. Three of them went for a stroll to see some stuff at the lobby stalls.

So, here it was, finally Mahek and I were alone again.

"Mahek, I just love this song," I said to start the conversation.

"Ahem, seems somebody is cupid struck. C'mon Raj, you didn't even tell me. Tell me now. For whom, your love isn't gonna change," she said in a teasing tone, trying to pull my leg.

"YOU," I blurted. "Can't you see it in my eyes?"

Shocked and stunned, her eyes widened even more and silence prevailed.

"What going on between you two Love Birds? *Uff* Raj, what happened to you, how come it's taking you so long to reach out for her lips," suddenly Preeti out of nowhere popped in and took my moment away. Adding to it, she made us feel utterly awkward.

That minute, 'if I could have I would have', killed Rahul for choosing such an irritating, utterly foolish girl with no sense of what to say, where to say and when to say.

Mahek, after that, became a little quiet and avoided any eye contact with me. I kept on staring at her, and she kept on looking away.

Dinner was done and here I was, back to square one. My plane crashed on the runway, before even taking off.

On our way back, Preeti sat next to Rahul, who chose to drive, while Rohan got a call from his local guardians and had to rush to their place. That left me and Mahek alone on the back seat of Fabia.

Preeti was getting all romantic with Rahul holding his hand as she played some soft romantic music to set the mood.

Amidst that dark and scarce road, inside the car, here I was with the girl I was so madly getting inclined towards.

Mahek was a little sleepy; I could make out from her body language and asked her if she needed to rest her head on my shoulder.

Initially she hesitated and said, "No Raj, I am okay."

Cool breeze was blowing. The weather outside was cold as if it was mid-Feb.

Mahek turned towards me and when she noticed that her hair was brushing my face. She hurriedly held them and said, “Oh sorry Raj, I didn’t realise it was bothering you.”

And began tying them, when I held her hand off her hair and said looking right in her eyes, “No Mahek, don’t be. I was liking it.”

Mahek had that got-amazed look on her face when she looked in my eyes. It was like everything around came to a standstill. As if nothing was around us, as if we were into a total oblivion, in our own world, away and unbothered by anyone.

For me, it was just me and her.

Mahek couldn’t look into my eyes for long and she lowered her eyes. Still, I kept looking at her.

The moment just stood by. Acoustics of numerous love songs began to play in the background. I didn’t realise if it was being played by Preeti in the car, or it was the music from the chords of my heart which were being plucked by Mahek’s innocently sensuous looks. I took her hand in mine; she kept looking down and was almost numb, as if her heart had stopped beating.

Holding her hand, gently pulling her close to myself, I whispered again, “Mahek, I said something just now.”

She didn’t actually say anything but she didn’t even try to resist. She just kept looking down but there was a gentle smile on her face. She kept smiling when I said, “Mahek...,” and she gently lifted her eyes and looked into mine.

I drove myself even more close to her and she immediately clasped my hand and swiftly melted in my arms and laid her head on my shoulder, without saying a single word.

It was the moment. Amidst the dark night, on a lone stretch of road, with beautiful trees rushing by and gentle breeze blowing, and slight chill in the air. Mahek was there almost into me. Her hands were cold, and she was shivering a bit.

She didn’t say a word, nor did I. She just closed her eyes.

It was so beautiful that even I closed my eyes and began to feel the most inexplicable and special moment of my life. From the kaleidoscope of emotions, I began to view the world of our dreams where we both would lay the foundation of our present and make promises for the future. The euphoria generated by her symbiotic acceptance of my informal yet intense articulation of feelings, made me want to hold on to that moment for a life time, wishing from within, Newton’s relativity law to cause the time to dilate till eternity.

When suddenly Rahul said, “C’mon Mahek, here it is – your house.”

She suddenly opened her eyes and while Rahul and Preeti got busy in their own talks, she hurriedly tried to move away. She lifted her head and began to withdraw herself from my arms.

She lifted once. Couldn’t.

She tried again, I didn’t let her.

“Raj, Pleeeeeease,” and as she looked into my eyes, I took my face close to hers, close to her rosy pink cheeks, gently touching her face with mine and slowly whispering into

her ear, “Good night, Mahek.”

I released her hand, Mahek smiled and got down from the car and ran straight into her house.

The moment just passed by.

For the rest of the journey, I just kept thinking about her reactions, each expression of hers, each gesture of hers, and dreaming of her.

The entire night passed by in my dream-world. My beautiful world. My Angel.



Next morning, Mahek called.

Her call broke my slumber, and I answered, “Hey,” in my sleepy tone snuggling my pillow and turning to my side.

“Where are you Raj? Are you still sleeping? I am waiting for you and Rahul in the library,” she said.

“Library?” I wondered.

And then suddenly I realised that we three had decided to meet and work on our presentation.

I just got up and told Mahek that I would be there in fifteen minutes.

Took a hurried shower and reached computer lab. It was 9 in the morning, and at that early hour not many students were to be seen around in the campus. No official lectures were scheduled as it was an off for the faculties. But we had to finish our assignment and presentation, so we had decided to meet.

I rushed to the library. The campus was all quiet and vacant as expected.

I opened the library door and saw Mahek sitting right there.

There were two more students in the library.

I went and dragged a chair next to her and said, “Hi” to her. She smiled and said, “Hi.”

The two students working there just got up and asked us if we would be sitting there for a while so that they could go and grab a bite or two in the mess, so that they didn’t have to wind up all their stuff.

I opened my laptop and was waiting for it to boot.

Mahek was looking pretty in her pink top. Her pink cheeks complimented her attire. Simple, serene; she looked even prettier in the morning in her wet frizzy hair. Water drops dripping off her hair.

Mahek tried acting all normal but I could make out that she was deliberately trying not to look at me, as if she was working.

It was all calm and quiet in the library and nobody was around but the two of us.

I took a deep breath and gently took Mahek’s hand into mine.

She tried releasing her hand from my grip. She was smiling, and had turned even more pink.

She looked into my eyes and asked, “Raj what happened?”

“You don’t know Mahek, what has happened to me, and what’s happening now,” I said

caressing her hand.

“But, how come Raj. All of a sudden. *Kaise?*” she asked.

I held her hand, and said caressing her hair fringe away from her cheeks, “Even I don’t know how it happened Mahek. But look in my eyes and you would know,” I said.

“What would the eyes say, Raj? I don’t know how to read eyes,” she smiled.

I drove her with a slight jerk close to me. Drifted her body towards mine, and said, “Look into my eyes and you would get all the answers. Come close to me and trust me, I won’t say a word but you would get all the answers.”

She came close to me. I kept bringing her closer and closer to me, looking right into her eyes.

I asked her, “So, what’s your answer Mahek?”

She smiled and couldn’t say a word, but snuggled in my arms and whispered, “Yes”.

I held her face and here I was, up and all set for the kiss.

Mahek was hesitant and nervous, but I held her and went for the kiss; slowly my lips touched hers.

And we kissed.

And that was the beginning.

A new beginning; a new chapter of my life.

Mahek and I were in love.

It feels strange now when I think about it. From strangers to acquaintances; from just classmates to friends; from friends to closest friends and now here we were, all into each other.

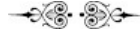
It’s strange, but then so is life.

‘Everything in life happens for a reason’. Words that I ignored all my childhood were actually making sense to me.

I realised, Mahek had to come into my life, and that was the reason God made us meet the very first day...

## Chapter 7

# Underrated Love or Overrated Infatuation



*Love: Changes one's life.*

*You see good in all things,*

*You remain happy all day,*

*You often catch yourself smiling all alone,*

*You can't concentrate on anything,*

*You forget to eat, to sleep,*

*You keep humming the latest love songs,*

*You start feeling like the lyrics have been written for you only,*

*You try to wear your best clothes to look more and more attractive,*

*You think about her while getting dressed,*

*You stand before the mirror and set your hair right, every now and then,*

*You stare at the starry sky,*

*You begin to love the beauty of the moon,*

*You start missing her, when she is not around,*

*You feel jealous about strange things,*

*You simply flow with the breeze,*

*You begin to lose yourself and yet, gain everything,*

*You just simply Love.*

It simply feels like you have everything in the world. A magical feeling that can never be put down in words, no matter how hard one tries. That one person, who was just an ordinary part of your life, one fine day, suddenly, becomes extraordinary.

So was the case with me.

‘Mahek’s, Yes’... changed my life.

We both were together finally. We both were in LOVE with each other.

*Love is powerful; it brings two people (no matter how different they are) together, such that their lives become intertwined.*

Mahek and I were just flowing with the breeze, in the sway of Love. All those cupid struck syndromes had begun. Such symptoms are perhaps universal.

Every person when single mocks at them, and eventually ends up doing the same.

Days began with her calls; nights ended with her calls. Sharing each and everything, sharing each moment, sharing every joy-every sorrow, was the most special part of it.

We used to attend lectures together. Completely ignoring what the teacher had to say, I used to be totally mesmerized by her very presence next to me.

She used to do all assignments with me. Most of the hours used to pass by sitting in the library – the place where we had spent the most beautiful, moments together.

Everything seemed, Perfect.

During exams, Mahek decided to come and stay with Preeti in the girls' hostel, because of study reasons, as she told her family. But the truth was, I had asked her to stay and teach me. All the while I had been very busy with my matches and lost quite a share of curriculum during my recuperation span.

Still remember that day, we both had decided to finish finance and accounts, so we both met in the library at around 10 p.m. She was already there, waiting for me. We started studying.

Mahek was explaining me the *fundas* of budgeting when I started caressing her hands and hair. She chuckled and said, “Raj please, what are you up to.”

I used to give her those lusty looks and she immediately used to read my intentions and shun me away. And next minute started explaining the stuff again.

Slowly, I started to draw my foot closer to hers, trying to pull her pants up her ankles with my toes. She immediately got up, “Raj, I am going to have water,” and left.

She moved out of the library. It was almost 12:30 by then. The entire corridor was dark. Nobody was there.

She walked through the corridor to the podium. I followed her. When she was bending down to have water, I grabbed her from the back.

She got terrified and said, “Raj, what’s this, don’t. Somebody would come.”

I was not even bothered about that. I told her, “No one would come. Stop getting paranoid, Mahek. I took her to a lone corner and we started kissing each other. With the slightest of noises, she used to get petrified.

After sometime, we went back to the library and resumed studies. Hence, it was decided that every day she would teach me and we would sit and study till late at night.



It had been months now that we were bonded together in this beautiful relation.

Mahek had to go to Delhi for her cousin's marriage for a week.

Days passed with difficulty without seeing her. The only solace used to be her calls and texts. I used to miss her all the time. It was like an addiction, her infatuated preoccupation in her presence later used to be a cause of an over exaggerated distress in her absence.

That day also, I had planned an outing with Rohan and Rahul. Mahek was all within me. I was missing her to the limits. She herself had told me, “Raj, go out and chillax with friends.”

So, here we three were all set for a guys day out.

We planned to go to 'ManU Café' to enjoy a ManU-Liverpool game and have an afternoon Drinks Blast.

I was all the way texting Mahek and in between was on call with her, when suddenly I dropped my key chain and turned to pick it up.

To my shock, I saw a girl in red Moccasins and Denims, walking down the escalator. The very sight of her, shook my insides.

It crushed me into a silent, awkward and suffocating awe.

Dumbstruck, I kept gasping for a minute.

Covered by thick black framed glasses, those brown eyes looked familiar. Decked by that dark red lip-gloss, her lips supported a perfect smile, parting ways with each other to reveal the tip of her tongue between those white teeth.

Though, everything looked different, yet, it was not.

My heart stopped. It happens when the heart faces its moment of truth and sorrow. I turned pale.

'It was SHRUTI.'

For a minute, the world seemed to have halted. I was numb.

My feet started moving towards her.

My phone was ringing, but for a moment I just couldn't hear anything.

I went up to her and said, "Shruti."

She turned back and was equally surprised to see me. That lovely smile, perfected by those two little dimples appeared on her face, "Hey Raj, is that you?"

The words kept echoing inside me for quite some time. I had so many things to say, so many questions to ask and so many answers to seek. But, I didn't know what to say, what to feel.

In a breaking tone, I asked her, "Shruti, you in Mumbai?"

"I am here for a workshop, for a week."

She was in a rush and hurriedly said, "Raj, my cousins are waiting for me outside. Guess, we should meet for lunch on Saturday."

She gave me her phone number before leaving.

I stood there, trying to figure out 'the reality'. I was unable to understand whether I was happy to see her or afraid about the things yet to come.

My thoughts were disrupted by Rohan, he shouted, "Raj, we need to go for lunch, not dinner. You need to hurry up. I can't miss the happy hours at the pub."

I gathered myself and saw around 10 missed calls from Mahek.

Immediately I dialed her number but after 2 or 3 rings, just hung up. I was not in a state to talk to her.

Was totally unstable because of what happened in the last 15 minutes.

All the while in the pub, I was lost in my own thoughts. They repeatedly asked me to join them but I didn't feel like doing anything. When this prolonged for some time, even they stopped asking me.

Rohan and Rahul were totally miffed at me. We had planned a total fun filled boys



outing and I had somehow screwed it up for them.

That night when I reached my room, I took my cell phone which had at least hundred messages from Mahek and a hundred more missed calls from her.

I finally gave her a call.

“Raj, where have you been? I have been calling you for like an eternity. What happened?”

She was tensed. She showered me with endless questions.

I kept listening but her words were just falling flat on my ears.

I told her, “Nothing, just got busy in the party and nothing else.”

Mahek realised that I didn’t want to talk. She said, “Raj, you seem to be very tired, guess we’ll talk tomorrow.”

And after the routine good night words, we called it a day.

I changed and went to bed.

Once again, Shruti’s thoughts splurged my mind. I began thinking about her. For a while, Mahek was out of my mind, and I was wondering about Shruti and looking forward to meeting her. Amidst the cyclone of thoughts, don’t know when I dozed off.



Like every day, at 0730 hours, Mahek called.

“Wake up Sweetie. Good Morning”, “Get up baby and get going.”

Like always, I cuddled my pillow and turning side said, “Yeah, just two more minutes, na”.

Then, after 10 exact minutes, Mahek called again. She knew I would crash again, and thus as a routine, she used to call thrice, after a gap of ten minutes.

But today was different. I was up by the first call only.

Even she found it strange, but then didn’t speak about it.

As she always had been, she would never come and say things. She believed in giving me my space, always.

But, by her tone, I sensed that she had numerous questions, which she would never ask.

I had nothing to say at that time. I just pulled myself up for the routine chores and got dressed.

It was 10 already and I had to meet Shruti by 11.

Before I could open the door and leave, my phone rang. I knew it was Mahek, but still I didn’t answer. Lest, I dropped her a message –

*‘Hey dear, I am visiting my aunt today. So, might not be available on call, all day. Would call you, once I am back. TC. Luv.’*



As I waited eagerly for Shruti outside the Café’ Mangii, in Powai, I kept building images of our meeting.

I kept wondering, how it would be sitting with her after such a long gap, after we

abruptly snapped out, one fine day.

Shruti arrived.

She was wearing a lemon top with black denims and her classy shades.

We both went inside and sat on a table that I had reserved. It was her first visit to Mumbai and thus I wanted to make sure that she'd had an experience of all that is best about the place.

So I had chosen this place, as I knew she loved Italian.

The wooden outdoor deck pepped up with a display of numerous deserts and coffees, was something that I knew would thrill her. The nice ambience of the sprawling and exquisite interiors complemented with scrumptious delights, exotic wines and a panoramic view of the mystical Powai Lake, was loved by Shruti, as I had anticipated.

As we both sat face to face, we began talking about our routine lives. She told me about her workshop here, about family and other stuff. I told her about my college, friends and stuff.

We had some awkwardness between us that was quite evident.

Still, we were trying to bridge the long gap that maybe destiny had forced upon us.

But after a few lines, we both used to just sit quietly and silence spawned for a few minutes.

Suddenly, Shruti just uttered, "Raj, why the heck are we behaving as if we are new to each other?"

"Yes, we should be like the way we were earlier," I replied within no time, as if I was just waiting to say that myself.

"Not really, not completely the way before, but yes not this way either," she said in a quipping tone.

And after a pause, we both broke into laughter.

Thus, the awkwardness just vanished into thin air.

After the lunch Shruti wanted to go shopping, so we left for Bandra.

We had so much to talk and share with each other.

Somehow, all the pebbles were falling at the right place. We were so much in sync with each other that it never felt for a minute that we had broken off long ago. The chemistry that always brought us together had not rusted even by a smidge over the period of time. Nothing between us had changed.

Shruti, as always, shopped and shopped, until finally I dropped.

It was fun being with her. It would be honest of me to admit here that during the time I was with Shruti, my mind had lost every single trace of Mahek.

As if, I was back into that phase where Mahek never existed.

Sounds selfish of me though, but that's the truth.

*But was this a beginning to an end or an end to a new beginning.*

I didn't know. Perhaps, I didn't want to.



Thus, Shruti and I planned a perfect itinerary for the rest of the four days of her stay in

Mumbai.

Every afternoon, I used to meet her after her workshop and evenings were dedicated to her.

From malls to eating joints to disc to beaches, we roamed every favourite hotspot of Mumbai.

And those three days flew within no time.

Mahek all this while had tried contacting me so many times. I couldn't give her time. May be I was deliberately avoiding her. Things were happening so fast that I didn't have the time to think. It was like a powerful tide and I was just flowing with it. I was unable to figure out and I didn't know what to tell her, if at all to tell her. Thus the only option I had, was to speak less to her during the time.

Lying on my bed that night, I don't know, but there was something that was bothering me from within. Unusual restlessness was growing stronger and stronger in me.

Mahek's words: *Everything happens for a reason.*

If that was true then what was the purpose of Shruti's coming back into my life. I wondered.

And if this was to happen, then why did Mahek happen? What is it that I felt for Mahek? And what exactly was I was feeling for Shruti? Was love that, what I felt for Mahek or what I had for Shruti? What did I actually want? What was happening to me?

I didn't have a single answer to all this. Caught between head and heart, I was going crazy that night.

I kept looking for answers.

After thinking all night, I figured out something for myself.

*First love – Always leaves some traces deep within our hearts. Love may not reach its culmination, and we may even move on. But does it get uprooted from your heart, ever?*

The answer is – No.

May be. Never.

And what happens when, one fine day, it comes back in front of you?

Seeing the person you loved with all your heart, standing right in front of you, brings back all that is buried deep under.

All those dreams, all those memories, all those moments shared together, all come, knocking at your doorstep.

So how long can you keep the door shut and not let them in.

It is natural for any person to fall back for it, because it is all that you wanted at one point of time, and when finally it is happening, it is impossible for you to refrain.

For Shruti and me, we never wanted to part our ways, ever. But we surrendered to the tyranny of the destiny.

It would have been justified not to fall back, had we parted on a bad note, but it wasn't so.

If circumstances had set us apart... destiny was bringing us back.

I loved Mahek. She was the best thing that ever happened to me. So, how could I cheat

on her?

But at that point, I knew – I loved Mahek, but I loved Shruti more.

And thus, by no means it would be correct to be at two places at the same time.

This would be a bigger betrayal for Mahek.

And I could never do that to her.

I knew God finally had mercy on me, but it came at the wrong time.

Just when I was about to venture into my future, my past came and held my hand.

But then, one was going to get hurt. In any case, a part of me was to die.

And thus, Mahek had to be gone.

It was DECIDED.



Getting ready for the dinner that evening I kept looking for those perfect lines, to tell Shruti and make a formal move.

It was Shruti's last day. So I had planned a full night out with her.

It began with a dinner at the HRC.

She reached just on time.

Looking stunning, steaming hot in her black one piece glittery halter dress, she just waived to me, as she got down from the cab.

I noticed her from top to bottom.

Her black dress, made her look like a bombshell which had already ignited the fire in me. Walking on those red stiletto heels, she was just posing a nice smile. Her hair fell straight on her collar bone, kissing her earrings. Her halter neck highlighted her neck even more. The red stoned pendant was beautifully marking the start of her cleavage. She simply looked stunning and I just couldn't take my eyes off her, even for a second.

We took a table in the lone corner of the hall.

I didn't say anything but kept looking at her.

She remarked, "Raj, will you stop staring at me like that."

"How can I let go off a beauty sitting so close to me, without even scanning her," I winked.

"Ahem, what's so nice about me?" she asked.

"Everything is nice about you, Shruti. Always been."

"Not bad. Do you still remember everything about me?" she asked sarcastically, "Everything?" with a gleam in her eyes.

"Of course. Why? Have you forgotten it all?" I asked.

"No Raj. How can I ever forget all those moments? They are embedded deep in my heart."

"You were my first love, Raj. You taught me what this feeling is. What it means. You have always been a great friend, a great companion and a great lover. You made me cry, you made me laugh, you made me feel that something in me was special. You were the best thing that could have ever happened to me."

"What about these moments?" I categorically, splashed this question at her. I wanted to

know what was going on inside her.

“These moments? These are as special as you are to me,” she replied.

Her answers were exactly what I wanted them to be.

Everything was going fine, all my darts were falling on the right spots. Shruti’s wicked answers and the looks which she was throwing at me, were hinting the same that was there in my mind.

So, I just held her hand and broke it out to her, “Let these moments last forever for us. I still love you, Shruti.”

“What?” snatching her hand from mine, she spoke.

“Raj, you are just getting it all wrong. When did I say, I have *those* feelings for you.”

“You meant a lot to me and you still do. But, I have moved on, and so should you,” she said, thrashing all my dreams in a single blow.

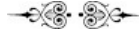
“Listen Raj. It was all over long back.”

IT WAS ALL OVER, LONG BACK.

*Dreams written on sand were never to stay, then why cry if they got washed away...!*

## Chapter 8

# “Forgive Me Mahek... I Just Don't Wanna Love”



Shruti just left.

All dreams were shattered in a single blow.

Last few days with her, brought a new hope, but in a minute everything fell apart. I was torn.

I was dead... I was numb... I was broken.

It was something that I had always wanted; something I got, only to be taken away from me.

Yes, a moment ago I had everything I ever wanted, but now I had nothing. I saw life flowing off my fist. Tried to grasp it till the end, but like water never stays in your grip no matter how hard you try, it slipped away.

Couldn't feel, but something deep inside was hurting badly. Felt like someone was stabbing me again and again, and yet I was not giving up on my last breath.

Love hurts. It does, and it hurts bad, real bad.

Lifeless and numb, I walked towards the beach and just stood there, gazing at the waves come and go.

Suddenly, got a text from Mahek –

“Raj, what is the problem? I don't understand. I have been calling, texting, past so many days, but you never replied once.

Tell me if it's all over. Why are you doing this to me? Say it, what it is. Please, I am dying every minute, kill me once but tell me the truth.”

Seeing Mahek's message, I felt as if I were back to hell again.

I wrote back to her, “Mahek, I had got back with Shruti. Things got normal between us, but then again they fell apart. It's all over for me. I don't need anyone. It's OVER.”

The moment I texted all this to Mahek, there was no feeling of remorse or even concern. I admit I didn't even think what I was writing. I was lost in my own grief and didn't want anything from life anymore.

I just wanted to be left alone.

Mahek never responded back to my message, nor at that moment, neither for hours. I was waiting for her reply.

I just kept sitting there staring at the vast sky and below it a stormy violent sea. Just kept staring at the tides pass by, over and over, trying to catch up to the shore, and just touching it for a minute and then retrenching back. Something, similar to what had happened to me.

Soon, it was morning but I never realised the same.

Gathered myself and headed back to hostel and just collapsed on my bed.



Days passed, when one day while I was sitting near the library, I saw Mahek walking by the corridor.

I couldn't muster strength but still raised my eyes to look at her.

She was different. She was all quiet amidst a crowd full of friends. Everybody quipping about something or the other but she walked quietly and passed by, without even looking at me.

I thought I should call her out, but just couldn't. Something inside held me from reaching out to her.

Next morning, lectures resumed. I was talking with Rohan and Rahul, waiting for the start of the lectures.

Mahek just entered, came and sat on the last desk, and didn't even look at anybody around.

The Mahek, who used to be the chirpiest of the whole lot, had suddenly become quiet. Nobody heard a word from her in days. She never used to smile. Most of the time, she used to be alone. Often, she tried to just cut off from friends and people around. No friends. No fun. She had just become unresponsive to everything around, even me.

So many times, people came up to me and asked, if I had any clue to what happened with her.

But I never had any answers.

Lectures got over and without a word she used to walk out.

Things had become totally different and her quietness, made me feel even worse each day.

Mahek was a changed person and the reason for this change was me. The worst part was, I knew it but still could not do a bit.

So many days passed by, things remained the same.

It was like I had snatched away her smile, and the feeling was eating me from within. She got aloof. She had taken into her own seclusion and now I could feel a huge wall around her that I could never even dare to invade.

I used to keep staring at her... with a hope that she would at least once look at me but it never happened.

One day, I got to know from a classmate that Mahek fell down the staircase and had a fractured leg. It was so bad that she'd to be hospitalised.

Rohan and Rahul that day came all harried to me and said, "Raj, Mahek is in hospital. Let's go to meet her."

I once thought of not going, but then couldn't say it and rushed with them. Her parents had gone out for some official trip and her cousin sister had been taking care of her.

We all reached the hospital.

Rahul and Rohan, just went to her and asked about how it all happened, but I just could not say a word.

I just stood by the door, looking at her.

For once after so many days, rather almost a month, Mahek looked at me. Our eyes met, but that look in her eyes, made me lower mine. She had tears in her eyes and a million questions rolling in those teardrops. For a moment I felt like going and holding her in my arms, but just could not. She kept turning her eyes off me and didn't even speak to me.

There was a time when she used to come running to me with slightest of her pesky little problems, and now was the time when she was in such a big mess and she didn't even bother to inform me. I felt hurt. All of a sudden she had cornered me.

Two friends, who were so close to each other, had become even worse than strangers. It was bothering me. I just wasn't able to take it all and I decided I would explain everything to her. She had always understood me and I expected that even today, I was confident.

I just texted her, "Mahek, get well soon. We need to talk. I have to clear things."

She didn't respond, not then, not for days.

I kept waiting but she never turned up. Then one day I just held her hand and took her out to tell her about what all happened. I tried to convince her, in every possible way.

"Mahek, what is it? Why are you doing all this?" I started.

She stood there with a stoic look on her face. She didn't utter a word and didn't even look at me. I felt as if she wasn't even willing to listen, but I kept saying what I had to. I wanted to tell her everything that had happened.

"Mahek, please don't take me wrong, I know you hate me but I can, rather I want to explain everything and hopefully you would understand me."

"Did I even ask you for an explanation? Now what Raj?" she spoke finally but in a strong tone, staring right into my eyes.

For a moment I realised how badly she was hurt. I could see that rage in her eyes, she was mad at me, of course she had every right to be. I tried to calm her down, and told her to at least listen to me once and then decide if what I did was wrong.

She said she didn't want any explanations, "You only said it's over. Now why this explanation thing and all," she again shot me down.

"Please Raj, I beg you. Let me be on my own... just... let me go..." she spoke, but this time her tone cracked and tears began to trickle down her pink cheeks. And from tears, it began. I felt disgusted.

She was the one person, I never wished to see crying... and here she was, all broken because of me.

Mahek just broke down badly, her voice cracked. Her anger turned into tears and she continued, "Raj, why me? How could you do this to me? I trusted you," and before she



could continue, her voice cracked so badly that she could barely speak.

I took her to a corner, made her sit and gave her a glass of water. I told her, “Mahek please listen to me and then you can take your decision.”

“You remember Mahek, I had told you about my past. Ever since we broke up, I never contacted her. You already know what all had happened that separated us.

She just ended it one fine day and went away forever. I had promised her and so never ever thought of going back to her. I had accepted that we weren’t destined to be together and I moved on.”

“Then I came to this college and always kept away from girls. You would have noticed that I never mingled much with them. It was because I wanted to stay away from all these things and was trying to move on from my past. But then, you came into our group. You are a nice girl and we kinda jelled together pretty fast. From bare acquaintances, we became friends and from friends, closest friends. Things changed and I fell for you,” I said.

She interrupted, “Raj it was all a joke. You were just fooling around with me. I don’t know whether it was a trick or you just used me to come out of your past. It was never me. It was all about you... Always.”

“Mahek please, whatever happened between us wasn’t a joke, it’s just that circumstances changed, let me just complete, please.”

And I continued, “When you went to your cousin’s marriage, we all planned for an outing and when I was in the mall texting you, suddenly Shruti came across. She had come for some training camp for a week. She said she wanted to meet me and I went to see her.”

“She had never been to Mumbai before and as a friend I showed her around. We went for shopping, movies. Things were going great between us.”

“I started falling for her and it felt as if it was all back, like nothing wrong had happened between us and I felt like she was feeling the same. It was like we both were back together,” I continued and so did the tears from Mahek’s eyes.

“That was the time I realised that I cannot be at two places at the same time. She was back into my heart and mind and I was just flowing towards her and since I realised that she was still there in me, I decided that I cannot be with you.

Mahek, how could I be with you and her at the same time, so I thought if I continued this, I would be cheating on you, and thus I stopped taking your calls and messages.”

“I know that you were hurt because I had been ignoring you, but I didn’t want to cheat on you.”

Mahek just got up and began to leave, when I suddenly grabbed her hand and asked, “What Mahek. Please... say something at least.”

Mahek said in a broken tone and with a broken heart, “Raj, you have cheated on me. It’s not done, one day you come and say that you love me, and then some other day, it’s over, just like that. What am I in all this? Am I even a part of it all? What was my fault in all this?” in a single go, she threw so many questions at me for which I didn’t have any answer.

She kept crying and broke down. She collapsed on the floor and her sobbing continued. Those sobs still haunt me. I haven't till date, forgotten those words and sobs of Mahek.

I took her in my arms and asked her to be there with me, as a friend, "Mahek, I didn't want to hurt you and so, when I realised I was in two minds I told you. Try and understand. We were best friends, and I need a friend like you. You have a special place in my life and I need a friend, I need you as a friend. Try forgiving me and let's just be Best Friends like we were."

She kept crying but I somehow managed to calm her down and pacify her. I even tried some stupid quips and jokes to make her laugh. As expected that didn't work.

But we were talking at least. Mahek, after calming down a bit, withdrew herself from my arms and said she wanted to leave.

I was confused. I couldn't make out if she had forgiven me or not. Because she didn't say anything.

I wanted to ask her but couldn't muster courage. So when she said she just wanted to leave, I said, "Mahek, I would just walk you down to your house."

She refused but I insisted and finally she agreed. But all the way she didn't utter a word. It was weird. She had become so quiet. I kept saying stuff, trying to make her speak something but my repeated efforts fell flat. It was like there had been a storm just minutes ago and now it was all debris around. Silence it was, between us. The silence that was awkward.

We reached her house, and she began to leave without saying anything, when I asked, "Mahek, so... have you forgiven me? Are we friends? Will we be..."

She just looked back at me right into my eyes with her tear drenched red swollen eyes and paused for a minute. Seemed like she wanted to say something and words came up to her lips but then never came out. She just ran inside.

All night I could not sleep. I just kept turning sides and thinking if she would understand me and forgive. It happens. The people whom you are close to, you never want them to think bad about you. We all care a damn about the rest of the world, but the person whom we love is the one, whom we always want to see the right side of us. That person's opinion matters to us. We can tolerate being bad in the whole world's eye, but no person on this planet can rise again, if he falls in the eyes of his closed ones.

I knew that I was right but wanted Mahek to believe it. It mattered to me. Rather, it mattered the most. I could never be at peace with myself if Mahek thought otherwise of me. The disgust in her eyes would have killed me.

Next morning, in the hope to see Mahek's reaction I rushed to the class. But to my dismay, she didn't turn up. I thought maybe she would come for the next lecture but it didn't happen. Mahek didn't come to college. Then passed the next day, and then another, but she didn't turn up at all. It perplexed me and the turmoil within me grew stronger. I kept wondering if she was all right.

I tried asking Rohan, Rahul but nobody had a clue. Rather, they were seeking an explanation from me.

I thought of calling her but then could not gather courage to do that. Each time, I dialed her number, her last stare; full of disgust, came in front of my eyes, and shook my confidence to call her.

Few days passed and one day she finally showed up. It was an evaluation test that she had come for.

Everybody pounced on her, asking where she was. Rohan, Rahul, Preeti all ran up to her but I stood away. She just made an excuse of not being well, that's what I got to know from others. She started coming regularly. I thought she would come and talk to me but she never did.

One day, we all were standing in the group when Rohan called Mahek as she was passing by. She came stood by. They all started talking. Inputs were coming from her, but occasionally. They were all trying to cheer her up by their quips especially Rohan and Rahul. Taking advantage of the jovial moment, even I popped one quip at her, thinking she would react. And yes, this time she did, but with a little nod.

Things began to improve a little. She used to come with our gang when we used to roam around in campus. Though she used to be a part of the gossips, rarely did she say anything.

She used to just listen quietly. She used to smile, hesitantly and artificially. Her smile, full of joy which used to come out as a gleam in her eyes, was what I was waiting for. She used to come to the mess for lunch. I began to needle her more. I used to quip at her with Rohan and Rahul.

They started imitating her speaking style, her heavy English jargons which used to drive us all crazy; and we all used to tease her about that. I deliberately pricked her with quips and comments, so that she would react and that'll lighten the awkwardness between us.

Since I knew how she would be feeling and could make out that she was hurt and remained depressed about it, so to lighten her mood and bring back that lost chirpy, bubbly Mahek, I did everything I could.

Slowly it started working. Mahek had started speaking to me, but very little. We all used to hang out and she used to come but one day something weird happened.

Mahek made plans for dinner and pushed us all into it. And we all complied. Everything was going fine, we all were busy in our *bakar* when I realised she was silent, "Mahek what happened? Why aren't you eating anything?"

"No, I don't feel like," she replied. But Rohan realised that I was the reason of her silence.

So he pitched in between, "Leave it Raj, Mahek is fine."

But I was staring right into her eyes; she looked at me blankly. That moment I realised as if she wanted to ask, 'Why me...'

I tried to cajole her by offering her favorite dessert – chocolate avalanche, but she refused.

She lowered her eyes and her face started growing red and pale. I don't know what happened to her. It was her favorite restaurant and she had invited us in the first place.

May be the place brought back all those memories of our time together. Mahek and I used to hang out at this place frequently. May be that was the reason.

I took a huge lump of chocolate avalanche and raised the spoon to her, saying, “Leave Rohan, she will have it from my hand,” but Mahek didn’t say anything. Looking right in her eyes I said, “Mahek, please have it or is it that you don’t want to have it from my hand.” She looked in my eyes, and I could see a tear stuck in there. The tear was stuck in her lashes waiting to just flow down but she was holding it there. Unwillingly and hesitantly she moved a little forward and took a little bite.

She looked for a minute at me, as I hinted a nod to her, “No Mahek...please.”

She stared, but then just could not hold herself and ran away from the dining bay, behind a nearby tree where she stood crying. Rohan noticed her and when others just got up to see what happened to her, Rohan stopped everyone else and said, “Wait guys she is fine. I would just go and get her back,” and he went after her.

I felt helpless.

After a while Rohan brought her back. When she came back, no one spoke about what happened instead just tried diverting the conversation. But I could see her red and swollen eyes.

The dinner was over and we all came back after dropping her back.



After a few days, Mahek became normal. We started talking more. But it was different; just about classes and stuff. Things became a little better. Often she used to ask me if I would come for lectures. She would always remind me of assignments and submissions.

I thought she was moving on and was happy about it. We were friends again. Thinking she was fine, I started retracting from her. I didn’t want her to have those feelings for me again.

But one fine day, Mahek called me.

The phone rang in the middle of the night. And in two rings, got disconnected.

I got worried, wondering why she’d called me in the middle of the night.

So I texted her, “What happened? You called?”

She called again.

I went out of my room to attend her call.

“Yes Mahek what happened?”

But she didn’t respond. She was silent, when suddenly I heard her sobs. She was crying. I asked her, “Mahek why are you crying?”

“Why me, Raj? What did I do? What was my fault? Where did I fail in this relationship,” and she kept going.

“I never said that it was your fault Mahek. It was my mistake, I accept, but now there is no point digging it. You seemed to be moving on, then what happened suddenly?” I asked.

Amidst sobbing, she said, “I had forgiven you Raj, and I made every possible effort to move on, but it isn’t working for me. I still miss you and I am stuck at the point right

where you left me. Tell me, what I should do,” she kept pleading and crying.

“You have got to move on Mahek. I have moved on and so should you.”

“Yeah Raj, had you not moved on, we wouldn’t have been on this juncture in life,” she said in a tone full of rage. I tried to pacify her. She kept asking me to come back, but after all that I had been through because of Shruti, I just didn’t want to be in any relation ever.

And I decided to maintain it for years to come.

It wasn’t that Shruti was out of me. But the void she had left in me, could not be filled by just anybody. So it was like, whatever I felt for Shruti, was what Mahek felt for me.

Life is weird. We both were at the same point, feeling the brunt of the same hurt. And thus I could understand exactly what she was going through, but I was helpless.



Next few days she was quiet again, then again she used to bounce back. But then again few days later she used to get stuck in the same labyrinthine. And me... I tried to comfort her and make her understand the need to move on.

But then, she repeatedly used to throw allegations at me that I used her, that whatever feelings I had for her were all fake, and that was something I couldn’t take at all.

So many times I used to hang up on her and at times even shout at her. But she kept questioning me as a person and I just couldn’t take it all from her.

Another few days, and we were back to being friends. But then this started happening very frequently. She used to break down, I used to pacify her, she used to question my character and my feelings that I had for her, which ended up in fights. And then days later, we patched up as friends.

Before things seemed to have become better, they used to get screwed up. Still, there was something that held us together. Our hearts were like a broken piece of magnet, repelling, but on reversing, attracting each other.

Soon I got saturated of all the mess. I started retracting from her, for her own good as well as my peace.



Then that day, when I came back from a week long break at home, as I entered my room, I saw a letter on my desk.

It stated –

*Dearest Raj,*

*Hope you had some nice time at home.*

*Raj, the first day I met you in the college, I never knew the future of that one small formal meet – that intro during the ice breaking session.*

*But then today, it is hard to describe in words, a friendship that grew stronger from a mere acquaintance to the best of friends and as you have always claimed ‘Good friends’. I don’t even remember after that first meet, if I ever even noticed*

*you much around or even spoke to you. But then destiny brought us together as the best of friends.*

*Things changed. I still don't understand how we both came together, so close, despite total contrasting demeanor, but I guess that was what God wanted. Days passed by, and we almost became inseparable. So many moments shared together, so much fun, those fun filled outings, those endless hours of gossiping and bantering each other.*

*Life was fun. Life was full.*

*With you I found the best of my friends – Rohan and Rahul.*

*And the bond grew stronger. I owe it to you that you got me the best Friends – Friends that I shall never forget in my life.*

*As they say, "Usually when we are looking for love, we never find it and when we stop believing in it; it finds us," the same happened.*

*Never came to know, how you and I became more than friends. Reminds me of the lines of a famous poem,*

*"Until there were you, Love was just a dream,  
Dreams of wonder and tears, Dreams of hopes and fears,  
Until there were you, My heart was all my own...  
And after you, Nothing of me, was my own..."*

*We saw in each other more than a friend and life was never the same anymore. I still remember that night when you said those words to me, I still feel that touch. Those were the best days of my life. And I would always cherish them all my life.*

*Life was just as beautiful as a fairy tale with you.*

*But then there are certain relationships, one should never encourage in life; only to lose whatever little was there to begin with. Whatever happened, may be it was my destiny, may be God's will.*

*You came and told me everything. I listened and even tried to accept. Though I admit, it took me time and all that while I have been at my worst of behavior with you, but trust me Raj, it isn't easy. It's certainly not.*

*It is difficult to accept infidelity, though I know you had your reasons and I honestly tried to make sense out of it. But Raj, why Me?*

*I have suffered in all this, and that too with no fault of mine. Between you and her, I got screwed up. My life changed because of one wrong decision of yours. No matter what may be the reason but I till date don't understand where did I fail.*

*I accepted it as fate. I never wanted to hate or curse you. Never can I imagine thinking bad about you.*

*I could never hate you Raj for what all you did. I tried being friends. After we fell apart, I thought at least we could be friends and even tried for it, every possible way. But there have been two people inside me – one is a girl who for no fault of hers was one fine day left in the middle; and on the other hand was a friend who never wanted to lose a good friend like you. This inner struggle within me, made me do things that I never thought I would.*

*So many times I have fought with you, said unpleasant words to you, but there had been one root cause behind all this. I always continued the friendship in the hope that one day you would realise what I have been through. Each day had been a struggle for me. I don't know if you can ever understand me, but it is hard to see the person whom you loved so much right in front of your eyes and yet so far away.*

*You always asked me to forget things and move on, but I have failed at it.*

*You may be practical but I am not. I don't know whether what you did was right or wrong. All I know is, I loved you truly and you never respected my feelings.*

*We all say we should be with the person who loves us and not the one we love, but did that thing ever work for me. Did you ever realise how much I loved you?*

*Even amidst all this, I tried to be there for you always, but I guess after friendship, love comes naturally; but doing the reverse isn't possible.*

*I cannot be with you anymore. I cannot hurt myself each day. Its better I kill myself once and bury the Mahek you loved once, rather than stay with you and die a slow death. You may think I am being selfish, but if you can ever think from my perspective, you would know how it feels.*

*Now there is no point of any more words, I guess it is time, I should just go away.*

*It feels bad, when I think that when we were together, we never fought, not even once, but ever since we broke off, we've had so many fights. I may have said harsh words to you, but I have been helpless Raj.*

*They say forgive and forget; but I can never forget you, not in this life at least, and remembering you means I would always remember what you did to me.*

*It takes courage, but I give up. Forgive me if you can, but just let me go. Forget me, even hate me but I can't just take all this anymore. I just can't hurt myself.*

*We cannot be friends, because I am still standing at the point where you left me. Ever since then, I have been so helpless that I couldn't ever go back into the past, nor could move ahead. Life has come to a standstill.*

*One thing I have understood is, 'never trust anybody'.*

*I trusted you. Never questioned you but you broke my trust.*

**You broke me.**

*But I don't want to be here anymore. I just want to get away from you. It would be hard, but then life had been harsh on me. I never did anything bad to anyone, hell, I never thought anything bad about anyone, still God punished me this way. I don't believe in God anymore. Had he been just, I wouldn't have been this way.*

*It's time I just leave everything behind. You would always remain in my heart. The place you have, shall never be taken by anyone nor would I ever let that happen.*

*Always remember, I still wish the best for you. Achieve all your dreams and I would pray that you get all that you always wanted.*

*There would be one person who would wish the best for you, each day; the only thing is that she wouldn't be there to share those moments with you. But I am sure you would understand me and forgive me.*

*Goodbye Raj...*

—◆◆◆—  
*... I Love you Rachu ...*

*Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu*

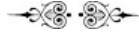
*I thinks see knows my name*

*Book Downloaded from: [EBOOK4IN.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://EBOOK4IN.BLOGSPOT.COM)*



## Chapter 9

# Bouncing Back with LSD in Goa



The Mahek episode created a vacuum inside me. For everyone else I was living a perfectly normal life, but only I knew what was going on inside me. I had become a stranger to my own self. I did everything that was humanly possible to let her out of my mind but I failed miserably. My heart was engraved with the epitaph of her memories and even after one whole year, I was still fighting with myself to get on with my life. I desperately needed a break.

That break came in form of a two day trip to Goa. Initially, I was a bit reluctant, but then Rohan along with Rahul and Preeti forced me into submission. I really thank God for blessing me with such good friends, had they not forced me I would have never been able to come out of the shackles of loneliness. I believe that trip was solely responsible for bringing me back on track.

Sometimes all we need is a re-boot.

## Day 1

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It was kind of a transitional phase for me. While everybody else was geared up for the excitement coming our way, I was still just pretending to be happy.

On reaching Goa at around 9:00 a.m., we rented two rooms in *Jokhim*, located on *Bagha* beach. Soon we were out in the sun to fetch two bikes. We rented two Avengers and came back to get Preeti. The distribution was easy; I accompanied Rohan on a bike while on the other sat our lovely, 'made for each other' couple.

Rohan had earlier been to Goa and had already planned an itinerary of the places we were going to visit. Since all of us were exhausted by the travel and were extremely hungry, he suggested that we first go to Mango Tree (a famous beach shack situated at the Vagator beach in North Goa) and grab a quick bite before proceeding to other places.

Designed like a traditional Goan shack, Mango Tree had amicable waiters and admirably calm ambience and lavish interiors. Although they took a lot of time in serving our order, but believe me, the food tasted like heaven and we enjoyed every bit

of it.

After stuffing our bellies, it was time to get some drinks. We took a beer bottle each and started riding our bikes towards our next destination, *Calangute Beach*.

On our way to Goa, Rohan had told us about the famous water sports, all of us were very excited to witness the adrenaline rush it instilled and that's the reason why it was assigned first spot on the list.

Rohan handed us the life jackets and said, "Buckle up guys, it's time for some serious fun."

I and Rahul gave a pleasant nod, while Preeti decided to stay back as she had some kind of skin allergy.

"Okay, first, you all will be going for a Banana Ride followed by Jet skiing and parasailing," came the words from our guide, Manav.

Manav left to get an inflatable boat similar to the shape of a banana, while Rohan took the lead and said, "Just try to remain afloat guys and you will be fine. Don't try to swim in there if you don't know how to swim, just let your life jackets handle that part."

These words were daunting but then adventure-sport won't be adventurous had there been no element of risk involved.

Once our banana boat was tied to a speed boat, it started racing across the blue sea. As instructed, we tried to maintain our balance on the banana, but a sudden turn of the boat was more than enough to fling us into the sea. I don't know how, but Manav judged that we were trying it for the first time therefore he immediately jumped into the water and caught hold of me and Rahul and then helped us haul back on to the banana. Rohan on the other hand managed all that on his own.

Admiring his athleticism, I asked, "Dude, how can you do that all by yourself?"

"I know how to swim and I don't have that beer belly hanging like you guys."

I knew that the second part of his answer was a sarcastic comment, but I ignored it because after all it was immense fun and I had tasted such enjoyment after a very long time. That thrill passed titillating vibes across my whole body.

After we finished our rounds of banana ride, we started looking for Manav, who had gone to arrange for water scooter required for Jet Skiing.

After Manav was back, he started taking us one by one for a ride on the water scooter.

I was the last one to get the ride. Learning by the experience of Rahul and Rohan, I told Manav, "Bhai, I want to handle the scooter from the beginning only and not on the way back to the beach. I will pay you extra if you will let me do it."

Someone has rightly said, 'Money can buy you anything'.

"Okay, but don't accelerate much and slow down when I tell you to."

The ride was electrifying and the fact that unlike others I rode it all alone had amplified my happiness.

The old Raj in me was bamboozled by the exhilarating environment of Goa and was already repenting the lost year.

Just as I thought Goa was all about fun at beaches, and freaking out with friends, I was presented with beauty, sheer beauty I must say.

I have always believed that beauty is at its best when it is wet. And, here we were presented with three... not one, not two but 'three' such beauties. It happened when we were gearing up for our last water sport, parasailing. I don't know how, but Manav managed to tag 3 German girls along with us. All six of us got on board, and our boat started to sail across the sea.

Rohan whispered to me, "Holy Shit, Just look at them, I can cum ten times a day by just looking at them."

Unable to control myself, I started to chuckle. But within no time I had to kill it because the girls started staring at us.

Manav instructed two of them to get up and get ready for the adventure. Once tied to the rope, the parasail heaved them up. Unlike the other two sports, this was a much safer thing as the person sitting in the speedboat reins control of the momentum and height of the parasail, which in our case was being done by Manav.

I don't know how, but my mind was struck with a selfish idea that made me get up from my place and after taking all the precautions in order to avoid attention of Rohan and Rahul, I slowly crawled towards Manav.

I murmured in his ear, "Manav, I want you to tag me with this *firang* babe. You take care of me now and I will take care of you later."

Manav understood me well and tagged Rohan and Rahul together. To my surprise, Rohan resisted it and said, "I want to go last." Perhaps even he was thinking on the same lines.

Manav turned towards him and replied, "No Sir, that can't be done, the boat may tumble."

Next he turned towards me and stared directly into my eyes, as if saying, 'You better pay your dues'.

Once Rahul and Rohan were done with their air voyage, it was my turn. My turn to prove the mettle, not to Rohan or Rahul, not to the world, but to my own self. I desperately wanted my grief to go away, which was possible only if I'd found another girl. All the college girls had shut their doors on me, thinking that I screwed up the relationship; they eyed me with such retribution that my heart started to hate my own soul.

I was already scanning the German girl. She had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen, which were undoubtedly was her biggest asset. Her top was short enough to reveal her navel. Her belly was so flat that it could put an F1 track to shame. I had never seen a body more toned than hers. I was wondering if she bore that '*Germany Go Gyming*' kind of attitude. She was wearing a white top, which was hanging down her shoulder and showed a pink strap.

I don't know why, but hot girls like Pink, while boys perceive anything Pink to be sexy. To my mind, it might be an effect of classical conditioning, where in boys, for centuries, have been accustomed to looking at super hot, super cute girls with something pink over their bodies, that now they have started to associate pink with them.

Manav grounded Rahul and Rohan on the boat and tied the girl along with me to the

parasail. Away we went, like a kite into the open air. It felt like the world consisted of just one color and that was blue – blue sea, blue sky and a blue whale. This was the moment I was looking for, away from the world hanging mid way, I asked her, “Hi, I am Raj, what’s your name.”

She replied in a typical German accent, “Hey, I am Cera.”

“That’s a really nice name. By the way where are you from?”

“Germany.”

“I love Germany,” came an instant reply, which no doubt was inspired by my lusty thoughts. In my mind, I wanted to say ‘I love you Cera, and I so damn want to spend time with you, will you be my girlfriend,’ my desperation to find a new partner was bewildering my thought process.

When I thought that I didn’t have much to talk about I recollected that I had recently read the book – *Mein Kampf*, though I didn’t like it much but I knew that for a German it will be of immense importance. I mentioned it to her, and we kept discussing it for some time. I noticed that our distance from the boat started to reduce rapidly, I wanted to talk more, I wanted to know more about her, but I realised that I had lost my opportunity. I had always loathed Hitler, and this instance only increased my hatred towards him.

Just before landing on the boat, I softly whispered in her ear, “It was really nice talking to you. See you when I see you.”



On our way back from Calangute Beach, Rohan told me that he had a contact in Goa who was ready to provide him with *LSD – Lysergic acid diethylamide*. On hearing this I literally turned back to see his expression, immediately I knew that he was not lying.

In a state of shock, I said, “Hey, man I hope you know it’s a bad thing.”

“Oh common man, you are a grown up. Do you know that in 80’s whole of America was doing this? Even Steve Jobs had mentioned his experience with the psychedelic drug as one of the two or three most important things he had done in his life.”

He paused for a moment before including me in his plan. “Any ways we are taking it just for experience, we will not fall for it or become an addict. It’s a once in a life time experience. You ought to try this. Never again in your life will you get such an opportunity. I mean you will not try such a thing with your girlfriend or wife or kids around. Believe me, God wants us to do this together.”

I have always encouraged Rohan to take marketing as his MBA major. His influential skills were mind boggling, he actually makes one believe in what he believes is right. But the catch is that, never in my rarest of dreams had I thought that they will be exercised on me and that I will be influenced to do something which I opposed out rightly.

Without giving me a chance to speak, he continued, “Common Raj, LSD is one of the safest drugs to use, next to marijuana. It does not do anything to your body; it just... hmmm... triggers your brain. You will have one hell of an experience, and yeah don’t worry you will not die by taking it. We are taking just half stamp each.”

I did not want to say yes to him, but I also did not want to say No. So my conscious mind started coming out with obstructions which might have helped me in stopping Rohan and my unconscious urge.

“But, what will we tell Rahul and Preeti.”

“Leave that to me.”

“What if we get caught?”

“Don’t be a pussy Raj. I thought you were the gutsiest of us all.”

Unable to counter him, I agreed, “Where will we get it from?”

Never in his entire life had Rohan planned anything, but just for that day he had everything sorted out, in a commanding tone he said, “Get ready, we have to meet Nico in half an hour.”



“Yeah, speaking. Oh, Hi Nico.” I noticed on the side mirror that Rohan was on a call. Unknowingly he switched on his speaker.

“Where the fuck are you. I have been waiting for you for over half an hour now. I am leaving in 5 minutes.”

The phone went dead. Rohan muttered, “Bastard.”

We reached the lonely lane where the exchange was to take place. A tall, Caucasian male was standing next to an Acura. His head supported hundreds of dreadlocks, which I felt were intentionally there to provide a hippie look.

I remained on the bike, while Rohan went near him to score. The exchange happened quickly. Once done with us, Nico sat on his Acura and drove insanely, as if racing with an airplane.



After an hour of discussion, we decided that we will consume LSD in *9 Bars* which is beautifully located in one of the cliffs overlooking the tranquil Vagator Beach.

We took half stamp each of the stuff we had with us. It felt like we were chewing news paper. No taste at all. Nico had told Rohan that half stamp will give us a trip for about 6 hours, and it will take about an hour to start functioning.

### **12:00 to 1:00**

When we were about an hour in, DJ played, ‘Dark Side of the Moon by Pink Floyd’. I started to sing along (droned along, at times, when I didn’t know the words). At a distance, I saw a red and green light flickering. I don’t know how, but I started to read a pattern, 3 times green followed by one time red, this continued for some time and BAAAnggg... I was on MOON.

The only explanation of this hypnologic glance induced in me comes from a very famous American science fiction series ‘Fringe’, which mentioned about a concept where in if you subject a person to a particular wavelength with accurate timing and intensity of flashes then it is possible to hallucinate him.

It might sound crazy, but I felt that I was a part of Apollo 18 mission. I saw all these ugly looking monsters there and along with my team which consisted of Iron Man and Green Lantern, I was fighting them out.

‘Weeee WON...!’, but the joy didn’t last much because Rohan woke me up from my slumber.

“Hey man, what are you thinking?”

Before I could come up with an answer, he started, “Know what, I can feel music, I can see it move, just like an AVS in winamp. This is awesome.”

This statement from Rohan relieved me a bit.

We turned infantile, and found everything around, immensely interesting. We started to talk to each other and describe what was going on in our mind. For the next half an hour we kept morphing, bending and coloring the things lying next to us, smoke sticks, beer bottles, table and even the lovely looking waitresses. Mind you, it was all happening inside our brains.

Things were not the same that night; it was like ‘Alice in Wonderland’. We were laughing hysterically. We were just laughing. Had anybody noticed us, they would have felt that we’d gone insane and might have reported it to the police.

Thank God, that was not the case.

### **1:00 to 4:00**

As the night progressed, DJ started playing romantic numbers. I was struck by undying memories of Mahek when all the lovely couples present there started to move on the beats of ‘It Must Have Been Love’. I had been listening to this song over and over again. Just like anybody else it had been my ‘Break-up song’ (I believe every one of us has a break-up song).

The words of the song started to float around me. I felt that Mahek was present there and she was singing that song and staring right into my eyes. The intensity, with which she was looking at me, ran a chill through my spine. Every word of this song was like she was pointing fingers at me and asking for so many answers.

Her last words in that letter suddenly came live from her mouth, she was weeping, tears trickling down her cheeks and she was asking me, ‘Raj, what was my fault in all this. Where did I fail? What is it that I didn’t do for the relation... answer me Raj. Why... why... why...?’

It just started growing more and more into me. I could not control myself, I had to vent it out.

Seeing my uneasiness, Rohan asked, “What happened man? Are you okay?”

Without letting him complete his sentence, I butted in, “No Rohan, I am not okay.”

My voice was automatically raised; I literally lost control over my body, “And I have been not ok since the time Mahek left me. I have come to grief since then, and you know what, this grief is eating me from the inside. My life seemed so perfect when she was around and now I am nothing more than a zombie.”

With tears in my eyes, I held my head and spoke in a low voice, “I never wanted to

hurt her, man. I got confused when Shruti came back. I didn't see the difference between my first love and the true love. We shared such an enriching bond and now it's all gone. I want her to come back to me."

"I know I have hurt her, for no fault of hers. In my confusion, I screwed her life terribly. I know that, I admit it was my fault. But I just thought, I should be honest with her; so I told her what I felt, but in all this, she is the one person who suffered the most. She fell apart, but I know it was all my fault, but she never understood my side of the story, she just left me....," I continued.

#### **4:00 to 5:00**

Once I became normal, Rohan suggested, "We better get going now."

I dementedly wanted to get out, "Okay, I will drive."

Driving when you are tripping is a unique experience. You try to concentrate hard on the road as if your life depends on it. You Fail. You Fall. You Die!

Sometimes it feels that you are perfectly normal, but the very next moment it comes back and you start imagining things. In my case, I was riding in a maze like structure (like the one shown in movie 'Tron'). The trees on either side of the road seemed to be smiling and producing Mexican waves. The clouds above me turned into a giant smiling clown. Whatever I saw that night had three things in common – neon stripes, trails and tracers.

I was able to see much more connectedness in everything.

Immersed in the effects of LSD, I was even able to connect the dots and came up with my own theory, which explains the reason of break-ups. Later, I repeated it in various gatherings and gained a lot of respect and appreciation of the failed lovers. I named it as 'Law of Infatuation.'

It is based on the assumption that love exists in only two forms, pure and illusionary. Pure love is what exists between blood mates like a son and a mother, a father and a son, a brother and a sister etc. Anything and everything apart from this, comes under illusionary infatuation which is often termed as love.

Law of Infatuation states that every relationship is based on two types of forces – one is dominating in nature while the other is the one which gets suppressed. The closer they are to each other, the more compatible a couple is and the more they tend to digress from each other, the more wobbly the relationship will be.

Also, each and every dominating force searches for the opposite force which is capable of suppressing it. In my case, I was the dominating force in the relationship with Mahek, but I was searching for a match which would suppress me and that I somehow found in Shruti. This attracted me towards Shruti and I fell for her and started to think that she was the true love of my life. Leading to my BREAK-UP.

The Einstein in me was put off when I and Rohan reached our room and crashed on our respective beds.

It will not be wrong to say that it was a concentrated version of some of the best things that had ever happened to me in my entire life.

## Day 2

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After winning copious battles against multiple alarms of some of the top end smart phones present in the market, I finally woke up after listening to the loud thumping sound coming from outside. As soon as my senses made their way into my still wobbling head, I realised that Rahul was knocking on the door and even shouting abuses at us. I thought he had gone crazy and ignored him. Next, I glanced at the wall clock, but it was all hazy. I got up and went to the washroom. Relieved after answering the natures' call, I came out wiping my eyes and opened the door to let Rahul in.

"Hey man, you people have gone nuts or what? It's 6 and you both are still sleeping. Have you come here to sleep?" I could make out that he was really pissed.

Out of bewilderment I replied, "Dude, we slept at 5. It's just an hour. Let me sleep for at least 4 hours."

His face went blank, all the expressions drained out in an instant.

He replied in a cold tone "So, Preeti was right. You really don't know that it is 6 in the evening and that you have been sleeping for over 12 hours."

"What," I screamed. I wanted to slap myself. I wanted to kick Rohan's balls and above all I wanted to kill Nico for giving us such a heavy dose.

My inner voice started taunting me, 'Raj, who in Goa takes a 12 hours nap. You are an idiot'.

"We are waiting for you at Britos. We need to go and get a table there, it gets crowded really quickly. You two meet us there only," Rahul said in a really cold tone.

I nodded guiltily and said, "See you in 20 minutes."



Sitting at Britos, we began to enjoy the lovely evening. Dim lighting, great atmosphere, the sound of waves and cool breeze coming from the ocean along with sand under our feet made it a perfect place for dining.

Our wait for the dinner seemed to go on till eternity. Bugged by the poor service of the place we decided to play truth and dare. Empty beer can was spun and the can chose me to be ripped before anyone else.

Rahul in his usual taunting style said, "Raj, who was that girl with whom you went for paragliding?"

Caught on the wrong foot, I wasn't sure how to answer to his strenuous question. I kept trying to figure out the angles, but nothing came to my mind. Had I revealed the truth they would have crucified me.

"Raj?"

I looked at him. "Why do you want to know?"

Rahul and Rohan exchanged a quick glance and said, "Because she is standing right behind you."



I chuckled and turned around to take a momentary look. I felt a twitch. Dressed impeccably in a green off shoulder one-piece, a girl was walking – waving her right hand – towards our table. Her eyes met mine for an instant and I recalled what Joseph Campbell once said – ‘Everything starts with a story’. Possibly, this was the start of a new story for me.

In her typical German accent, she said, “Hello Raj.”

Her presence made me feel antsy.

“Hey, Cera. So happy to see you,” excitement in my tone was easily traceable.

My heart started jack hammering and pumping gallons of blood into my brain which made it difficult for me to process the thoughts originating inside my mind.

After, what seemed like a long pause, she said, “I am sitting with my gang near that Karaoke screen. Bye Raj. Bye everyone.”

She left and I started fidgeting my fingers.

Rohan and Rahul ogled at me like a vulture staring at its prey.

Rohan said, “I cannot believe Raj what you just did. You are such a saintly figure that you even let go of the gold fish which comes walking into your trap. Where are your feet I want to touch them? Please lend us some of your wisdom.”

He continued, “Did you even see her neckline that plunged like Black Monday.”

I could make out the cynicism in his tone, and replied, “*Arey*, but what could I have done.”

“I think you could have directed her to Rohan, perhaps he knows, what could have been done with her,” Rahul said. Preeti chuckled on his remark.

“Good one Rahul,” Rohan remarked.

“Do you think I really had a chance with that German babe?”

“Even if it’s a fool’s errand, you should still give it a try Raj.” Preeti’s one-liner gobbledygook made definite sense to me.

I got up and went to the place where Cera was sitting.



In just over 2 hours, I and Cera had a total of 14 pints of Heineken and the effect of alcohol mixing with our blood could be felt. I was already feeling a bit hazy.

“Enough of this beer, let’s have Sex on the Beach.”

Muddled by alcohol, her statement struck me like a whiplash. My brain was suddenly barraged by various Hollywood love scenes followed by the numerous blue films that have shots of making-out on sand. These thoughts started hitting me like needles.

Having witnessed my blank gaze, she realised that I was not aware of the drink and was actually thinking about getting laid on the beach. It gave her a real belly laugh.

Meanwhile, my phone chirped.

A message from Preeti.

It read – ‘In for a penny, in for a pound.’

I wondered as to why she always had to talk mumbo jumbo with me. I ignored the message.

Within next few minutes, we gulped two Sex-on-the-Beach each. I called up for the check.

“So, two is your limit.” Her voice was flat. I found it hard to believe that she could still have more.

Unable to withdraw, I promptly replied, “Is that a dare?”

“Yes, let’s have a shot of tequila each.”

I called for the waiter. “One tequila shot for the lady and two for me. Thanks.”

Having had what we had asked for, I asked her in an infantine tone, “Can we go out for a walk now?”

She gave me a suit-yourself shrug and said, “Sure.”

Under the dark sky, after finding a perfect spot, we decided to lie down. Staring right at numerous stars twinkling brightly in the sky, I took her hand into mine and asked, “My mom always says that everything in this world has a purpose attached to it. Stars... you see Cera, have an inimitable purpose of throwing light on a no moon night. Thus they inhibit the darkness to engulf our world. She also once said that there is hope in a raindrop, there is a purpose attached to it. I wonder what the purpose of my life is and will I be able to do justice to it.”

Turning towards me, she said, “Do you believe in Destiny, Raj?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Destiny is just a paraphrase given to the interconnectedness of totally unrelated events. As a philosophy student, I believe nothing just happens, there is a reason; a purpose attached to it. You just have to listen to it closely enough to hear it.”

Before continuing with her theory, she gently kissed me on my right cheek. Had it been an inch closer to my lips I would have called it a smooch. “So having understood the destiny, does this kiss tell you what your destiny has in store for you tonight?”

I hesitated for a moment as I was going to step into a territory from where going back to Mahek was impossible. One more step and I will never be able to face Mahek again.

But, my Desperation for Sex and finding a new Love, strangled the very thought of Mahek and forced it out of my mind.

I started kissing her like a wild boar. She readjusted her hair. I knew that she wanted me. Slowly, I reached for her dark pink lips, to have one of the most sensuous kiss of my life. It was truly magical. Soon the kisses changed into long smooches. Smooches modified into deep red love bites. Her, off shoulder one-piece dress helped a lot.

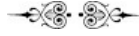
I caressed all over her waist and stomach, and then slowly I started to move my hand towards her perfectly groomed breasts. I unzipped her dress and pushed my hands inside her bra. I poked them once. She moaned. Without wasting any time I mounted myself over her and started pressing her thighs in order to make way for my lower half. I glanced at her breasts. She had light pink nipples. I started sucking them madly while she kept pulling me further towards her boobs.

I gave her a naughty smile and said, “Shall I.”

She smiled back and replied, “Let’s keep it up to first base only.” And so we did.

## Chapter 10

# American Born Confused Desi – ‘Debby’



Life had just bounced back for me.

Goa, somehow has this effect on people. The serene, calm beauty of this place instilled inner peace and the much needed calmness in me.

I had gone there with so much turmoil within me, but somehow while coming back from there, there was Peace.

Life moved on, I moved on.

I decided whatever happened, had to go away.



The other day, I was sitting in my room when Rohan came.

“Raj, Get ready fast. We all are going,” he said

“But, where?” I asked.

“What where? You don’t remember? It’s Mahek’s birthday today. How can you forget?” Rohan replied.

I suddenly felt weird.

I hadn’t forgotten that it was her birthday, but somehow I was just trying to ignore that fact. Through the day, I had somehow restricted myself from dialing her number. My one night stand with Cera was inhibiting me to take that step.

“I am not going anywhere. You all can go,” I replied in a stern tone, getting back to my work.

Rohan started his usual questions and all, but I had made up my mind not to give up this time.

Actually, I was scared of facing Mahek. Analyzing the situation, my brain did come out with some excuses for not going for Mahek’s birthday celebration.

*Mahek never invited me. Why should I go?*

*She just left one fine day, without even bothering to inform me.*

*If she couldn’t understand me, then maybe she wasn’t even worth it.*

*I tried so much to convince her, but she just walked away, putting the entire blame on me.*

*But deep inside I knew – I couldn't face her after doing what I did. She will never forgive me. She will never take me back.*

Rohan and Rahul argued a lot with me. They even said, if I ever liked her, I should go to at least wish her.

But I was firm on my decision.

After much of a scene, they both just left.

“You are wrong Raj, realise this for once. How can you be like this? Cum'on man, leave your ego, at least now,” is what Rahul said to me while closing the door of my room.

They left.

But by the time, I was fuming from inside because of his harsh words.

*'I was right, I did what was right. If nobody wants to understand me, then let them go away, but I know I am right',* I convinced myself.

I knew I had screwed her life once and I didn't want to do that again.

After a while, I mellowed down and engrossed myself into some work, but it didn't help.

Memories, you see, always hurt and the good ones hurt the most.

In the darkness, with doors closed, I slipped lower in my bed, pulled the sheet over my head and started thinking about the monthly trip which Mahek and I used to make. We had located an astonishingly beautiful, yet isolated spot near Peth Port. Every month we used to go there and celebrate our monthly anniversary. We had carved our initials onto a stone on which we often used to sit for hours together and chat about the days to come. Future prospects of our relationship, was the most common topic discussed in those long untiring sessions.

I still remember, it was Mahek who carved a heart around our initials and every time we used to visit, she used to put a mark below our initials as if she knew that we will part our ways one fine day and those carvings will act as my solace.

But then, I knew that everything between us was over and it was time for me to make a move in life.

That night, I had made a decision – to find a new girl for myself and unlike Cera, this was going to be a long term relationship.



Next day began as usual. We all met at the breakfast table. We were eating. Everyone was quiet.

Nobody even tried to initiate a dialogue. They never asked or said a word about their visit to Mahek's place.

Nor did I.

From inside, I wanted to know how she was, what was going on in her life. So many questions kept rising in my mind but I never asked.

I knew if I did, they would pounce at me again, and start the usual taunts, so I refrained. I just sat there, my fingers fidgeting with the buttons of my shirt and pulling off

the imaginary threads of my trousers.

Having read my mind, Rahul gave us a new topic for discussion thus killing the unusual silence, “Hey guys, our college had entered into a student exchange program with Lady Mount University of New York. So this weekend you might expect some perfectly groomed beauties fire up the whole campus.”

Surprised by the revelation, I asked, “And, how do you know that?”

Before Rahul could reply, Rohan butted in, “Because, he is going to stand for the post of GS this time and I am so sure the he is going to win it. What say Preeti?”

She just smiled back at him. So did I.

I wondered as to why I was unaware of it, but then it hardly mattered to me, I had never considered getting myself involved into something that didn't reap benefits. Hence, I was more worried about a decent placement, so I was busy doing courses which could provide a boost to my CV.

“Rahul, if possible, get Raj and Rohan into the committee that is looking into the orientation of these new students,” Preeti said.

“Yeah, will try.”

“You don't have to try, you have to get us in or trust me I will propose Preeti and you will be left alone. Preeti will not say ‘no’ to a handsome guy like me,” Rohan winked at Preeti.

Everyone burst out laughing.

“What? Why are you people laughing?” Rohan said.

“Yeah, sweetie, how can I say ‘no’ to you. Rahul, please do the needful or I will go with Rohan,” Preeti replied.

We all sat there for a couple of hours and kept pulling each other's leg. It was fun.



Just when our Cost Accounting class had bored us to death, a group of 5 foreign students entered our class along with the Dean. Most of the backbenchers who were asleep were woken up by their neighbors. I was one of them. Rahul had to poke me twice to break my slumber.

Our Dean, Prof. Ghanti started off with his usual introductory speech.

“Friends, today we have with us, students of Lady Mount University. As you all must be aware, our university has got into an agreement with their university under which we would be exchanging students for 6 months to provide our students with an exposure. We would like you students to be rebellious and break the shackles of the present education system. We would like you all to take a stand for a counterculture aimed at bridging the large gap between the theory and practicality that exists in our system. You students are our future. You are our hope,” he continued with his usual *gyan* before introducing the newcomers.

“So, without taking much of your time, I would like to introduce you to Eric, Shaun, Elizabeth, Daniel and Debonita and request you to extend your utmost friendliness towards them, making them feel at home.”

Debonita caught the class on a wrong foot, we all had expected some blonde hair foreigners walking amongst us, but here we were being introduced to a phenomenal Indian beauty. Straight away I realised, she was beyond my reach.

She was wearing a bright yellow tube top over skin fit black Tommy jeans. The Tommy logo was strategically placed over her curves, and an equally yellow Rhysetta bag hung from her shoulder. Giving an ethnic look to her overall American dressing was a set of black *Hyderabadi Lac* bangles which she was wearing on her right hand.

“She is a hipster,” Rahul said.

Unknowingly, I made a loud murmur, “American Born Confused *Desi*.”

The whole class burst out laughing.

Prof. Ghanti gave me one of his you-are-dead look while walking out. I ducked in, replied him with an innocent, I-am-sorry-look and then as soon as he was out, I started feeling proud as a peacock and sat there smiling like a gladiator.

After the class was over, we went and met our new classmates. I kept looking for Debonita but she was nowhere to be found. I wondered if my comment was the cause of her disappearance.

“Hey,” I turned around and was astonished to see Debonita standing there along with Rohan, Rahul and Preeti.

“Hey, wassup guys. I think you are already friends with Debonita,” I replied.

“Yeah, Raj, Debby is amazing,” Preeti replied in an excited tone. I could easily make out that Preeti had already started liking Debby.

I scoffed and extended my hand towards Debonita, “Hi Debby, I am Raj.”

“I heard what you said back in the class. I would have preferred if you would have said that on my face,” she gave an unexpected reply.

“Well, I was just kidding. Please don’t mind that.”

“Yeah, and you please mind your business. Do not comment on people whom you don’t even know,” she sounded really pissed.

“Hey, hey, hey American girl please stop your tantrum before I make a mockery of you in front of everyone.”

“Idiot. I don’t want to talk to you. Just F.O.,” she was literally shrieking.

Preeti intervened, “Hey guys just chill. What are you both fighting about? Why are you both acting like toddlers?”

“Rohan, you please take Debby and show her our brilliantly built, utterly gruesome campus,” Preeti directed Rohan and winked at Debby. Her statement did manage to crack a big, beautiful smile on Debby’s face.

Rohan left with Debby. I heard him saying, “Just let it go Debby. Raj is like that only.”

Preeti turned towards me and said, “Hungry *Kya*?”

I passed her a smile.

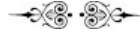
But before I could answer, she started, “I am so damn hungry. Let’s go to the mess and relieve our empty stomachs from the rats going wild in it.”

I knew that she had already had lunch with Rahul and was doing this to lighten me up, so I decided to accompany her.



## Chapter 11

### College Fest – ‘Taqneeq’



By the fall of year 2007, I was no longer sharing room with Rohan, my best friends – Rahul and Rohan – were dating two of the most beautiful girls of my college – Preeti and Debby. No matter how hard I tried to feel happy for them, I ended up feeling bad and detached from the group.

Ever since Rohan had proposed Debby over dinner, they started going out for their so called ‘Dinner Dates’. Sometimes, Rahul and Preeti used to tag along, which left me lonely. The group dinner which we used to have earlier, now seemed to be more like a double date, where in my friends did all that lovey-dovey stuff in front of me. I felt like a fish out of water and so, I started avoiding their company thereby giving them more time for themselves. Though they did their best to not make me feel awkward and alone but I was persistent to make a new start for myself.

Every time they would call me for a get together, I would give some excuse and not join them.

Eventually, the calls dried off and their attempts to patch me in became scarce.

However, there was a silver lining to it. Unable to get along with my school friends and their girl friends, I became friends with a gang of students – Manav, Shreya and Nitesh – who were trying to conceptualize and organize technical fest in the college for the very first time.

Rahul had already proved his mettle by standing in the GS elections, so now it was my turn to prove that even I had it in me.

*I believe jealousy sometimes helps you achieve an extra mile. I would never have got into it if my pride was at peace with Rahul.*

Four of us started doing ground work for organizing the event, which began with getting the necessary approvals from the college authorities. This task itself drained us to death, but the guidance from Prof Tripathi and our zeal to start a college fest on our own kept us going.

Now we had exactly 3 months in hand and we had to come up with the creatives, finalize the events which would be held in the fest, figure out the logistics required, work on a good marketing plan so that the companies be interested in sponsoring us, and



make an attractive publicity plan to pull the crowd from various colleges spread across Mumbai. It took us exactly a month and a half to get done with all of it and hence we started recruiting our juniors to execute what we had laid down.

With only a month and a half left and almost 50 percent of the work left, we started going heebie-jeebies. But, I knew, there was no need to press the panic button yet. The only thing required of us was to hold our nerves and work even harder and so we did. Throughout the day we used to run around the marketing managers of various companies for sponsorships, visit various printing shops to get the best bid for printing our banners and posters, and go to various colleges for publicizing out fest. While at night we used to hang around the college and put posters and banners all over the place.

Life for me was now restricted to the fest itself. More and more students started hanging around me and praising me for what we were doing. I became the poster boy for ‘Taqneeq’ which meant that my importance suddenly shot up. Students, teachers, visiting faculties, Dean and even the peons showed respect.

Messages and calls from Rohan, Rahul and Preeti kept pouring in, but I was too busy to reply them back. My ego had outgrown my ability to think rationally which forced me to think that they wanted to be my friends because of what I was going to achieve. Their friendship hardly mattered to me.

*Had I picked up their calls, I would have known that Mahek was in town and they wanted me to meet her.*



‘Taqneeq’ became an instant hit, it attracted a huge footfall and an equally high participation in various events.

Thanks to the hard work of Manav and Shreya there was no logistical glitch in the whole event. Nitesh even roped in some of the celebrities, which steamed up the popularity of our fest.

Our fest culminated with a glamorous fashion show. Almost all good looking girls of our college participated in it, barring Preeti. Debby was the show stopper.

Dressed in black half-shoulder, strapless, one-piece, ending much above her knee she gave me an impression of a wicked angel. She seemed perfect. Standing back stage, I thought, if only I wouldn’t have fought with her that day, I would have left no stone unturned to get this beauty.

Show left the audience flabbergasted. It bowled them over. Rounds of whistles and hooting kept on going for another hour or so. I went and thanked almost everyone whom I saw and then I returned backstage to thank Debby who actually had casted a spell on the spectators and had provided a spectacular end to ‘Taqneeq’, so I thought that I owed it to her.

As soon as she had removed all her makeup, I went up to her and said, “Thanks, Debby. You have provided a perfect end to Taqneeq. I am really grateful that you participated.”

She passed on her perfect smile to me and with sanctity of a priest she replied, “Raj, I

haven't done anything great. It's your hard work that has actually paid off. In fact, that happy smile on your face is already speaking volumes of how relieved and content you are of your achievement."

"Oh, really," I smiled.

"I really like people who are high achievers. We never got to interact much, but surely I would like to know you more," this statement was totally out of context, I wondered what she was getting at.

Cutting her off, I enquired, "So, how are things with Rohan? And where is he?"

"Oh, please don't talk about him. I don't want to talk about him. He must be busy with his so called school friends Rahul and Preeti. Everywhere we go he tags them along, and those idiots seem more than happy to intervene our private moments."

A part of me wanted to slap her and shut her up to relieve me of the crap she was talking, but a part of me was also deriving a sadistic pleasure as she kept on demeaning and abusing my friends.

I wanted her to continue, so I said, "But, I thought you liked their company. Preeti is so fond of you and even if you don't like them to come along you can ask Rohan to stop calling them."

"Yeah, I have told him, like a million times. But he scolds me and tells me to keep out of it. We have had long arguments over it and now I can't take it any longer. Look at you, you broke those shackles of friendship and see what you have achieved. You can now easily stand for the GS elections and win it. Perhaps, you will end up getting the best placement in college."

I felt as if I had actually defeated the world, more so I had defeated Rahul. I felt as if I was the king. I felt as if my stars were now perfectly aligned and any step taken by me couldn't go wrong.

Just as I thought of trying them out, she asked, "Anyways, chuck that. Tell me where you are partying tonight."

The ball was in my court.

"Party? No plans *yaar* and to be truthful, I should say that I don't have any company."

With this, I made a killer move. This would take the brightest of the star to come to my rescue.

"Oh, no worries. Let's go to my room. We will party there."

I couldn't believe what she said. To reconfirm, I launched a counter question at her.

"Won't we be disturbing your roommate?"

She smirked, "Being a foreign student gets you some benefits here, having a single occupancy room is one of it."

I wondered what was in store for me.



Her room was beautifully decorated with the ethnical Indian stuff. A heavy silk woven tapestry hung on the wall just above her bed. Two dark brown silk curtains, matching the color of the wall opposite to it, hung from the pelmet above the door which gave a

luxurious look to the room. Next to the bed was a carefully carved wooden dressing table with all the expensive brands of perfumes, deodorants, and other women accessories placed haphazardly over it. A set of extra large brown bean bags were carefully placed at the entrance for the guests like me.

“Please make yourself comfortable, I will take a quick bath and be right back,” Debby said.

“Shouldn’t we call Rohan.”

“No,” came a stern reply.

“Are you still mad at me?”

I shook my head but before I could speak, she continued, “If not, at least you can celebrate your success with me,” she tapped on my head before proceeding to her closet to take out her nightgown.

Her touch made me skip a beat and created turmoil within me.

I closed my eyes and thanked my lucky stars who were kind enough to get me till Debby’s room.

I opened my eyes to a shriek that came from inside the bathroom, “Ouch.”

I ran towards the bathroom.

Within a fraction of second Debby was out of the bathroom with a white towel wrapped around her torso. She hugged me tightly, with her head burrowing itself in my shoulders.

She started crying loudly.

“What happened Debonita?” I enquired.

She sobbed for a while before coming out with the words that were so funny that I almost died laughing.

“There is a lizard in my bathroom, Raj.”

Realizing that I was actually laughing at her, she detached herself from my cuddle and pinched me hard on my shoulder which forced me to shout, “Okay, I am sorry.”

She came closer to me. Her breath echoed in my ears, hitched and uneven. I moved my hands to her lips and started caressing them with my fingers. She attempted to bite my finger. I withdrew it instantly and instead caught hold of her long silky hair, pulled them back and kissed her on her lips. The pain was visible on her face but it was somehow bringing out the devil resting inside us. We began smooching madly, with her tongue in my mouth and mine in hers. I started caressing her body with my hands and grabbed her ass. I started squeezing it. The moment she noticed it, it blew her fuse and she broke our intense lip lock.

She cried out loud, “What are you trying to do?”

I had no answers, so I kissed her again. Her anger was visible in the kiss. It was more passionate than the last one.

She unbuttoned my shirt and slid her hands inside it, while I was playing with her back. Following her lead I quickly unfastened her towel to expose her new-yorker figure.

After making love for hours, a subtle silence surrounded us, as we found it difficult to

come out with appropriate words.

Finally breaking the silence Debby said, “Raj, I hope what we just did meant something to you because for me, it meant a lot.”

Unable to understand her intent, I said, “Yeah Debby, it did. But, Rohan...?”

Before I could finish, she butted in, “I will leave him Raj. I will leave him for you. I am done with Rohan and those stupid friends of his.”

Tears rolled down her eyes as she completed her sentence, “All I want is you Raj. I am in love with you.”

I was dumbstruck and was full of guilt. My inner self started questioning my act.

*‘Raj, how can you backstab your school friend? How can you make out with your best friend’s girlfriend? Raj, how can you love Debby?’*

But then the devil inside me along with my wicked ego suffocated the thoughts arising from my inner self and after a while my mind started justifying what I just did.

*‘Raj. Rahul and Rohan never cared for you. They went out for dinner with their girlfriends and took you with them only to make you feel envious. Your friends don’t care for you. They just want to use you and make fun of you.’*

*‘You never fell for Debby. She did. Rohan is nothing when compared to you and Debby has every right to make decisions for herself. You are right. You cannot be wrong.’*

After getting a grip on myself, I murmured, “I love you too, Debby.”

## Chapter 12

# ‘5D’ – Doomed to Destruction: Debby, Drugs and Deceit

*‘Cure for a breakup is a hookup’*



Rohan had once told me that ‘cure for a breakup is a hookup’. This was definitely true for me, but the irony was that my hookup led to his breakup.

It didn’t feel good initially, but then these are the ways of life.

Debby’s presence made me forget my past. It made me forget those daunting memories of Mahek. Even though we hadn’t made our affair public, partly because of Rohan and partly because we were giving each other time, but we were still very much into each other and used to spend most of our time either in Debby’s hostel room or at various stores in Bandra, shopping for Debby. I had almost got all my stuff into her room and had moved in with her.

Debby often joked that we were friends with benefits and it’s more of lust than love that existed between us. These comments used to drive me crazy which led to some fanatic fights which were followed by long sessions of love making.

It was a perfect little place.

Over the course of time, Debby convinced me that Rahul, Preeti and Rohan were not truthful to me. This evoked a volcano of hatred within me.

Two months before GS elections, while sitting in the college mess, we started discussing about Rahul and his prospects of becoming GS.

“Raj, yesterday when I went to the staff room to meet Miss Shivani, I overheard a few professors saying that Rahul will be our next GS,” Debby said.

“That’s great. He is a deserving candidate,” I replied, sounding excited.

“What shit. There are better candidates than him and you are one of them,” she said in a convincing tone.

“Who? Me?” I was shocked. “Debby, you know pretty well that I will never stand against Rahul, he is my childhood friend.”

“You know what, you are a giant whinny bummer. I made a big mistake to perceive

you as an ambitious person. You are just letting this opportunity pass by without even trying,” Debby broke into tears before even completing the sentence.

I kept quiet. My eyes were fixed onto her lovely face, which was looking even more attractive now.

She sobbed for a minute and continued in her you-cannot-say-no-to-me tone, “Raj, I know you are the best and I want that there should be no one in this college who gets more than what you get. I know that you deserve to be the GS and not Rahul and I can’t see you stepping down, just because Rahul is standing in the elections. Still if you want to do that, then I will go out of your life.”

Believe me, when you physically get involved with a girl, you kind of get addicted to her body. You can live without food and water but not without caressing her body.

Letting Debby go was out of question for me, so I started pondering over options.

Once again I tried to convince her.

“Debby, I know that you are my only well wisher out here, but try and understand that we are just 2 months away from the elections and we have not yet started preparing for it. Rahul has been ready for it since the last semester itself. I don’t think, I stand a chance.”

“Have you ever thought that why your so called ‘best friends’ never discussed about the whole GS thing with you. No, right. Okay, I will tell you. They never wanted you to stand up for the post even though they knew that you could easily win. Do you know the reason?”

She shook my hand vigorously and continued, “No Raj, you don’t. You are blindfolded by the trust you bestow in them. You just choose to ignore these things. But I can’t. I have never told you about this but when I was with Rohan, I have seen them plotting against you. Raj, this is your chance to stab those backstabbers right in their chest.”

“What? No Debby. They can never do this to me. I don’t believe you. You must have been mistaken,” I found myself shaking my head in disbelief.

I took my cell phone out and just as I was going to make a call to Rahul, Debby interrupted, “See Raj, how stupid you are. Even after going through all this, you still have the audacity to call them.”

After thinking for a minute and taking a deep breath, I kept my phone inside and said, “I will run for the post of GS.”



The fact that we were starting late meant that we required a hell lot of hands to help us.

Debby’s charm helped us rope in a few juniors who were given the task of running the campaign for us. She also made sure that some of the most desirable girls from junior batches were associated with our campaign so as to attract more votes.

Debby’s idea of provoking the egoistical me and putting it face to face with Rahul, ensured that I fought tooth and nail for the votes.

Rahul and I were no more on talking terms. Similar terms applied to Preeti too. However, I was still in touch with Rohan. A casual hi and bye here and there along with

few texts was all that existed between us.

Rohan tried hard to talk me and Rahul out of the cold war waging between us. He even succeeded in getting Rahul and me in one room.

Rahul was already present in Rohan's room when I entered.

"Hey Raj. Wassup man," Rohan said.

"Nothing much. Just slogging hard these days," I replied, without even looking at Rahul.

"Oh great. And..."

Without letting Rohan complete, Rahul butted in, "Why didn't you tell me, Raj."

I could make out that he was up in arms, but even I was ready to fight fire with fire. In fact, I was just waiting for him to start, so that I can unleash the fire inside me.

"What?" I replied in a flat tone.

"Why didn't you tell me Raj that you wanted to be General Secretary? I would have stepped aside. Why are you doing this to us? People are making a mockery of our friendship."

"Okay, if that's the case, then you please step down now," I scoffed and continued, "You know that I am better than you."

Seeing Rahul turn red and shiver with anger, Rohan intervened, "Raj, you know that can't be done. None of you can step down now; it's against the college rules.

"Because, Debby has told me everything about you guys. I know that you people plotted against me because you are jealous of my capabilities. I feel miserable of the fact that I was friends with you," they turned expressionless after hearing that.

My statement sucked the very life out of them. I felt happy to see them like that and was geared up to intensify their sufferings even more.

Breaking the awkward silence, Rahul said, "Raj, you trust Debby more than us," his tone was so low that I found it difficult to even hear him.

He continued, "Do you even know anything about that girl? Do you know why Rohan broke up with her? No Raj you don't. She was envious of our friendship. She used to bad mouth the bond which existed between us. She is a spoilt brat Raj, she never understood, nor will understand the importance of friends. Rohan could not take this and broke up. She just knows how to use people and leave them when she is done with them."

These words blew my top and I shouted, "Cut it out. Just cut this crap. Just because she is not with your friend Rohan it doesn't mean that she is bad. Debby is good at heart. I know her. She deserves someone better than Rohan. She broke up with Rohan because he is an idiot. He doesn't know how to handle girls. It's good that she left him."

Hearing my words, Rahul lost his control and dashed towards me,

"You mother fucker, how can you say this for Rohan. You don't tell me that you know how to handle girls, I know what you did to Mahek.

You broke that poor thing. You killed her. God might forgive you Raj, but Mahek never would."

But before he could touch me, Rohan caught hold of him. Rohan made sure that he

dragged Rahul back a few steps.

Then he turned towards me and said in a cold tone, "Leave."



I did leave that damn place, but what I also left behind was my soul.

The Raj in me was dead.

The two unique strands of Friendship and Love, which together formed the DNA of my life, rather Raj's life, were lost in thin air.

My life which always revolved around my childhood friends had lost its whole foundation. The nucleus of friendship, which always used to guide my actions, was now missing and the result was... like an unstable electron, I was looking for a new energy source to get attached to. In this desperation of finding a new friend, my urge for getting close to Debby increased by an eon and the result was that she started governing my actions.

All in all, I was at her disposal. Where ever she went, I used to tag myself. I used to party with her, for her and also used to pay for her. All of a sudden I was exposed to a new lot of youngsters for whom drinking and having drugs was a way of life. I quickly adopted myself to her ways of life, and for a couple of months, each night was a Party-Hard night for me. Whole night we used to hang around at the famous Mumbai Discs and used to gobble up gallons of liquor there.

Being Debby's boyfriend, I ended up paying hefty amount for these parties which were thrown by her, for her never ending group of friends. Each time we used to party with a different set of people. I used to wonder, being an NRI how is it that she has so many friends.

My finances were already going haywire and there was no single excuse that I hadn't tried for justifying to my parents, why I was going broke so soon every month.

Once, while she was getting ready for college, I brought this topic in front of Debby, I told her, "Debby, I think we should now restrict our so called Party-Hard nights and start spending time with each other."

"What? Why?" she replied, not giving much attention to what I was saying.

"Because, I think we are spending far too much on these parties every night," I replied.

"So, what. We have enough money, right honey," she replied in a casual tone.

Her, I-don't-care attitude always irritated me and her answer just blew my lid, "So this, that I don't have any money left, for partying and spending on you."

My sudden outburst didn't just surprise her, it surprised me too. I wondered how it came out of me.

"What do you mean?" She mumbled, with a couple of tears in her eyes.

I expected her to shout at me, but her reaction in turn caught me on a wrong foot. I didn't know what to say to her. So, I just kept staring at her.

"I know Raj, I am a burden on you," she said coming closer to me.

She continued, "I never thought that I would be a parasite on someone. But you know *na*, my parents are so fucking concerned for me, that they won't give me an extra penny



to spend on myself or these parties. They think that I am a spoilt child and don't know the value of money, that's the reason they had sent me in this country in the first place. And now they want me to beg for each and every penny."

She broke into tears and I started blaming myself for bringing this topic.

"Ohhhhh, I am really sorry Debby, I don't know why I started this topic," I very well knew why I had got this topic out, but her tears ensured that I suppress the real reason, deep inside me.

Next, what I said was a typical Bollywood dialogue and it did bring a smile on her face, "I am totally ok with your expenditures Debby, and since I am your boyfriend now, I think it is my responsibility, more than that of your parents, to take care of you."

With a smirk on her face, she replied, "If that is the case Mr. GS, what all can you do for me."

"Anything and everything *yaar*," I flirtatiously replied.

"You already know *na*, I have some debts on me. I had taken some money from those friends of mine. You know Ranvir and Sanjay whom we met the other day at club house," she began.

"Yeah, I vaguely remember," I replied as she kept caressing my forehead.

"Ranvir was my ex and now he is using dirty tricks with me. He is saying, he would tell my parents everything if I didn't return his money now," she spoke as her voice began to soften more into sobs.

"How much is it *yaar*? You should throw it on his face. Don't worry, I will help you. I am there. I shall take you out of this mess."

"But I don't want to take money from you. I am becoming a burden on you. It isn't right, Raj. You are nice, doesn't mean I keep on taking favors from you."

"Are you crazy Debby? Why do you even have to think about this? Do I mean nothing to you? Don't say that again... ever," I spoke in a louder voice this time, getting up right from where I was.

She took my hand into hers, "Raj, this isn't right. I can't be a parasite on you," and broke out saying this.

As tears kept rolling down her eyes, I didn't understand anything but held her tight in my arms and said, "You don't have to worry about it at all. I am paying your debts. And if you value me, please do not refuse. Just tell me how much do you owe him?"

"60 Grand."

"Oh my God, this big an amount is what you owe? What did you do with that much money, Debby?" I questioned her in a little harsh tone.

She started crying even more, "Raj, you just leave. Don't help me. Why should you bear my debts? Leave me on my own I would manage or if not would let that Jerk ruin me as he wants to."

"Debby, will you just stop. I am not saying that. Don't take me wrong, but it is a huge amount and I don't have that much money. Even if I borrow from someone, I could come up with a maximum of 10 Grand."

Shocked by this disclosure, I was still numb and somehow tried to absorb this

shocker.

“Raj, you are forgetting. You have the College Fest fund with you. You are the GS and the sole custodian of these funds,” she prompted.

“Forget that Debby. Those are funds for the fest. Everybody has done loads to gather all that money from sponsors. I can’t take that money. This is totally out of question,” I replied back in a stern demeanor with a tone full of conviction and clarity of decision in mind.

“OK...FINE. I would go and surrender to Ranvir. Let him ruin me as he wishes to. Let him do whatever he wants with me. You leave Raj. I need to be on my own. Please go. Forget me as tomorrow onwards I would be the slave of Ranvir and pay my debts. Juussssssssssssst GOOOoooo Raj,” ... “NOW”.

I was totally taken aback. Wasn’t able to figure out at all the right thing to do.

*‘Ethics what I always stood by, or my Love- Debby, who always stood by me?’*

*‘What should I do? Is it right? But then to let Debby go into that jerk’s hands, would that be right?’*

I was going bonkers thinking and figuring out the righteous thing.



## **Saturday, 18**

### **1500 Hours**

Heading towards the Committee Room on third floor, I was recalling all the pending tasks. The fest was right on our head, and there was still loads to do.

Things to do:

1. Banner template finalization
2. Ordering for the Hoardings
3. PR status update from Raveena
4. Sponsorship accounts file
5. Budget sheet review
6. Reimbursement of expenses

‘God, so many things left. These people aren’t even bothered, while so many things are piled up. How could these people just take things so lightly and go for a movie.

Grrrrr... I would have to take charge myself,’ I grinned as I settled on my desk.

“Hey Arshina. Raj this side. Have you shared the templates for the banners?”

“Oops Raj, I forgot to mail the same to you. Wait, will just ask my roomie to mail the same to you as I am out with friends today.”

“Please share the same at priority. I need to send them to the dealer for printing and settle costing with them, thanks,” I replied in a stern tone. The pressure was mounting on me and it reflected in my tone.

### **1800 hours**

“Hi Arvind, where are we on the web site design? We need to close that by tomorrow and make it Live asap.”

“Yeah Raj, I am almost done with it. Just a minor coding part left. Pappe is working on that. Should be done by tomorrow. Don’t worry, by Monday we would launch it.”

“Good, thanks.”

2030 hours

“Hi Raj. This is Martand from Durex Jeans. We had a word with Mr. Rajul regarding our sponsorship formalities.”

“Mr. Martand, we are just working on the same. I am yet to file for the reimbursement claims. Would just complete the financials and inform you. Will get back to you soon on the same.”

“Fine Raj. Just let us know.”

“Sure. Thanks for calling Mr. Martand. It is indeed our pleasure to have you as our key sponsors for the Fest.”

2100 hours

*The last but the most important task left was the finances. I was almost tired of the entire drudgery but then I had set the deadline to complete these tasks by the night.*

Munching some potato wafers, I opened the accounts report which had been mailed to me by Rishi, who was in charge of the sponsorship committee.

The report consisted of the detailed cash inflows and outflows which were occurring in the fest. I in-turn had to take a snapshot of the same and circulate it to faculty in charge of the fest. Each year, we had one faculty who used to govern the fest activities. This year Mr. Tripathi was our faculty in charge.

I opened the sheet.

To my surprise, this year our team had managed to amass a lot of money. A damn good job had been done by our sponsorship committee and I was elated to see their commendable effort.

Somehow the Inflow column of any balance sheet brings a smile on your face while the outflow column always manages to take it away.

This time it was different though. Out net inflow was around 10 lakh while the outflow showed that we were a surplus of around 2 lakh.

I immediately called Tripathi Sir, but he didn’t answer the call.

Just as I hung up. I got an SMS.

It was Debby.

The message read, *‘Hey Honey, m feeling too low. Lets meet tonight.’*

I just replied back, *‘Yeah, I need to close this work today only. Will call once done.’*

Debby was in trouble and I had promised to take her out of the mess. But how, was something, even I didn’t know.

This was taking a toll on me. Arranging for that much money was out of question.

That very moment, the helper boy came and handed me an envelope.

It had the bill receipts which had to be pronounced to claim for the expenses for the fest.

I was just having a glance through those slips and began to make entry into the online portal for which I had login credentials.

The login rights were given to only 2 people from the student lot: Me, being the GS and the Sponsorship committee in charge – Rishi.

I logged into the account and began filling in the details of each bill receipt.

One after the other, it felt as if there was no end to those idiotic and monotonous bills.

I was getting tired doing the same entries again and again. Been working for long, I needed some rest. Last ten receipts were left and I was rushing things up in order to get done with them.

Suddenly, I encountered a blank slip. It was stuck somehow with the previous leaflet.

Just when I was about to dump that blank bill receipt into the bin, a thought rushed into my mind.

‘What if I fill in some receipts and put them into expenses. Nobody, other than me from student body has access to these statements and I am sure no professor would take the pains to go through each expense item and every detail of it. Debby needs money and we already have surplus.’

An inner voice just prompted, ‘This would be a theft.’

Sweat drops began to trickle down my forehead. Strangely, sitting in an air-conditioned room, I was sweating badly.

I was scared. Never before in my life I had even filched a single penny from anybody and here I was thinking of forging the college funds.

Morality had been conquered and enslaved to bow in front of Cupidity.

In no time, I headed towards the Xerox and scanning machine. Before I proceeded, I ensured I had locked the room from inside and then it all began.

Though, I wasn’t actually picking up money from some safe vault, somehow the reflexes drove me to lock the room. Perhaps, theft remains a theft, so what if it’s digitalized.

I xeroxed a copy of the bill. Next, I applied some whitener on the name and amount and other details, I xeroxed it again.

This copy was close to an original bill, but still some work was needed to make the plan foolproof.

I scanned a copy of the bill and mailed it across to my laptop.

Following this, I headed to my laptop and opened the Photoshop to modify the serial number of the bills, logo manipulations and some overall touch ups.

After almost an hour’s effort, I made the first copy of the forged bill.

Then one after another, I continued, till I could ensure that I had forged bills to cover the entire sum that Debby needed.



Next morning, I just got over everything. Began to believe that perhaps nothing had happened last night. I had those bills with me and I slowly started to make claims for the forged bills.

The entire amount was reclaimed, within a month, and I had the cash which I gave to Debby.

My fear of being caught subsided as soon as the fest got over.

Management started appreciating us for the efforts which were put in by the organizing committee.

Things were sorted and she was happy. For a few days I used to feel a little uneasy every night I went to bed, thinking how low I had stooped down. Every time I used to speak to *Maa*, something used to prick from within. But slowly, I became used to bearing it and started coming out of it.

Post the successful completion of the fest, my super successful tenure as GS of the college also ended. I was happy that it would give me that extra bit of time to spend with Debby, for which I used to crave.

Debby's partying hard attitude did not change even after 'Ranvir Episode.' Instead, it got even worse. She started hanging out with anyone and everyone around her.

I was worried for her and often used to display my concern for her, but the result was still the same. I was being taken for granted; I knew this, but still was left with no other option but to just play along.

It felt as if she willingly was trying to get rid of me.

The way she used to cuddle with some of our friends, used to drive me crazy. The result was that I started getting irritated by one and everyone around me.

Those classes, which earlier I used to yearn for, now felt like a burden to get done away with. I started bunking classes whose professors were new and did not know me well, to slowly bunking all the classes.

Whenever I used to call Debby to get some remedy of the pain I was in, the only answer I got was – No Answer.

And, at times when she did pick my call, all I got to hear was, 'Raj, I am really busy, baby. Can we please talk later?'

With Debby not in scene, next thing which I could think of was 'Booze'. I wanted to drink my heart out, and get relieved of the pain which I myself had brought upon me. But, I missed out on a basic thing that guilt does not go away with ignorance; rather it goes away only by admittance.

Not ready to admit my mistakes, I was sinking deep in my new found habit of drinking and taking drugs.



Debby and I were now no more on talking terms, primarily because she never answered my calls and secondly because I was tired of just running behind her. During those days, I became more of an introvert, anti social person which was totally opposite to what I actually was. Being the GS of college, I did interact with almost each and every one in college, but when it came to being Raj, I was just afraid to talk to people. Perhaps, I was too afraid of either hurting my loved ones or getting hurt by people around me.

Doomed in my self induced darkness, I had lost count of days, months, and seasons;

and most importantly my semester exams. Being low on attendance and class tests marks, I was almost on the verge of being barred from the second last semester exams. Emotionally my life was ruined, academically it would have been ruined had I not met Rohan that day in the college corridor.

“Hey man, How are you? Haven’t seen you around. Everything fine with you, right?” He completely took me by surprise.

I wondered, *‘Why he was asking about my well being. Did he come to know about me and Debby? If yes, then how? Is Debby back with him?’*

Unable to come up with words, I blabbered, “I... I am fine. How are you?”

“I am good man, just tied up with these last minute submissions,” he said, wagging his file, which ensured that I had a good look at it. The top of the file read, Operation Management.

I really had no clue about the submission he was talking about, still I gave him a slight nod and said, “Oh okay.”

“Hey, by the way your name appeared in that low attendance list; and holy God, you are low on almost all the subjects. Where the hell have you been?”

This was not a big issue, I was surprised and thought, ‘Why is he going bonkers on such a pesky issue.’

Yet I ignored without saying much to him. “Rohan, I gotta go. Will catch you later.”

“Wait Raj. Is something wrong with you? You used to be the topper and these days all we hear is, you are amongst the last few scorers in the batch. All your internal exams have either very poor scores or an absent mark. Why are you not paying attention to your acads? If things go this way, they will not allow you to sit for the externals. This is the last sem Raj and the only fear which every one of us have is to clear this sem properly else, we shall even lose the jobs in hand. With such low scores in internal exams and poor attendance records, you will land up in a big mess. Please let me know if you have any issues. I am your friend. Tell me, at least. You have the best package in the whole batch, the best profile in the best company, perhaps what most could only have dreamt of. But the way you are heading, you would screw it all for yourself.”

“Rohan, thanks for the concern, but even I know this. Don’t worry. I shall handle things. I am tired now. Would go and crash in my room.”

I thought for a while but then knew that making use of my position, I somehow would manage to convince my teachers about my low attendance and low grades in class tests and take exceptional approvals for attending the exams.



Coming back to my room, I threw myself in bed and shut my eyes to sleep.

Unable to get that peace within I kept turning sides.

Then began to gaze at the ceiling fan for hours thinking about all weird things happening to me, the sudden change of Debby, then Rohan’s last minute words; sudden concern.

And eventually dozed off.

Next Day: 0800 Hours

My phone rang.

In my sub-conscious state, thinking it to be the alarm, I somehow rejected the tone.

And again slept.

After some 5 Minutes, it again rang.

“Damn. Who is it at this hour of the morning,” I irritatingly murmured.

It read – *Tripathi Sir Calling*.

Hurriedly and a little amazed, I immediately got out of the bed and answered his call.

After hanging up the call, it was like someone had just pulled the ground beneath my feet.

I was blank. Numb. Dead scared.

Sweat drops trickled down my forehead.

## Chapter 13

### Facing the Mirror

*“Bura jo dekhan main chala, bura naa milya koye  
Jo munn khoja apnaa, to mujhse bura naa koye”*

—Sant Kabir



Standing there in the room, numerous thoughts were hovering my mind. I lowered my eyes, staring at the tip of my Dockers, fiddling with the keychain with my fingers and chewing the gum in my mouth, I stood there totally clueless and numb, wondering why Dr. Tripathi had urgently called me.

I was just waiting for him to come and end the suspense so I could just elope as quickly as possible for my routine stuff.

Repeatedly looking at my watch for every minute running out of my hand, I was waiting for Sir to come.

Finally, as a solace to my impatient soul, entered Dr. Tripathi walking with a pile of papers in his hand and a stern look on his face.

“Sit down Raj. It’s going to take time. Are you in a rush?” he asked in his baritone heavy voice.

He was sounding different. It shook me a little because he had never been so stern with me before.

It grew the nervousness within me.

I knew something was terribly wrong.

The very minute I was getting these jitters in me, about what bomb was going to explode, my phone rang.

The sudden loud noise of my ringtone scared the hell out of me, amidst that silent room, where one could have heard the sound of a pin falling.

I fumbled and dropped my cell phone in that frame of mind.

“Why are you so nervous Raj?” sir asked, “I guess you have some other engagements for the evening. Is that so?”

“No... NnnnnNo, Sir... Nothing like that,” I stuttered.

By that time, my face had turned red and legs were almost shaking.



I didn't know why, but something was terribly wrong going inside me.

Clearly, the reason was Sir's never seen before body language and castigating demeanor, which kind of shook me.

Looking into his papers, he sat down on his study couch and without even looking at me, he spoke,

"Raj, you have never hidden anything from me ever, right?"

I didn't reply.

"Do I have any value in your eyes? Did you even hold a smidge of respect for me?"

He said staring right at me which had grown pale by now.

Sir's question had made a cold wave pass through my body.

"Sir, why are you asking me this. I have always considered you even more than my father. You have been like an idol for me, whom I respect from the core of my heart," I replied in a trembling tone.

Saying that, I couldn't even look into his eyes.

"Raj, it doesn't even make you feel ashamed, telling a lie right at my face," he said while getting up from his place.

"You have the audacity to lie to me, is that what you call respecting someone. Is this the way you show respect to your father?"

One after another, professor Tripathi shot tremendous taunts at me.

I couldn't understand what was going on in that room. I didn't even have the courage to look at his face.

"I am waiting Raj. Answer my question. Is that how you define respect?"

"You have hurt me Raj. I considered you my son. I never had a son of my own, but looking at you, I feel that may be I don't have to regret that I missed on that part of my life. You had, kind of, filled that gap for me. But today, I feel disheartened to say that rather than having a son like you, I am better off like this."

I could sense a little sob in his tone.

Tears had almost filled my eyes hearing those last lines from him. Knowing, he was ashamed of me, made me crunch from within.

A tear trickled from my eye. Then another and then another.

I felt disgusted.

I felt embarrassed.

I didn't have the guts to even look at him.

"Look up Raj. What makes you look down, have you done anything bad? This is it. Look at yourself. What are you?"

Saying this, he dragged me towards the long mirror in his study room.

"Cum'on Raj, look at yourself at least. That's you. Isn't it?" He continued.

One after the other, every word of his was like a million slaps on my face.

I looked at myself in the mirror.

"What do you see Raj. Tell me."

I just gazed up at myself in the mirror.

I don't know what shrieked within me. I broke into a burst of tears and fell on my

knees crying terribly.

“This isn’t me Sir. This isn’t me. I don’t see myself. I hate this person who looks like me. This wasn’t me. That Raj is lost somewhere,” I cried like a small kid.

For a while he didn’t even come to hold me.

“Cry Raj. Cry it out. Loudly. You have to take this out of yourself,” he said.

For minutes I laid there crying rather howling.

“Sir, I never wanted to be like this. But nobody understands me. Nobody thinks good of me,” I carried on, “I was never bad. People brought the bad out of me. I was never wrong.”

“Wait Raj. What did you think, you would do a fraud in the college funds and nobody would find out. I knew this. And I saved you from landing into jail. But that broke me from within. Is that what I taught you? You raised a million questions on my years of teaching”, “What made you do this my child?”

“Sir, I needed money. I didn’t have any other option but this. I knew I was wrong but then couldn’t see any other way.”

“There isn’t any need or reason that could justify a misdeed. So don’t even try. And what did you need this money for- drugs, pubs, gambling, match fixing and above all showing off your wealth to your friends. Disgusting Raj. I have been watching you for past few months. You have turned worse with each passing day. I thought you were a child and that there would be a limit to it all. But today, when I came to know about the fraud you did, I felt ashamed. I felt cheated. You were one of my best students Raj, if you have become what you have become then I guess I should leave this profession.”

With tears in his eyes he continued, “You have surpassed every boundary, Raj. Just look at yourself.”

“Raj, you know what has ruined you – Your ego. What do you think you are? Who are you? What do you think you have gained in life? If you think that you have attained what nobody else could have and that is what makes you superior to others, then you are wrong my child. If you see from where I see you, I think you are a LOOOOSER.”

His words made me shrink from within.

He continued, “Do you think that you have everything that is needed to be happy in life? Are you really happy? No, let me tell you, you are not. And that is something you know yourself but refuse to accept. Raj, I agree you have the best job that anybody in this whole college could ever have or wish for, you are the most popular guy amongst the entire lot, but do you have a single person with whom you can share a minute of your happiness?”

“Do you have one person around you, who would be there if ever you are in trouble?” “Do you have a single person who would do anything for you without even thinking twice?” “Do you have one person whom you can say would always be happy if you are happy?”

His questions just took me to a trance.

Those words hit my soul.

I paused for a while and then broke out saying, “I don’t know Sir. I seriously don’t

know who is good, who is bad. I just don't want to know."

"That's because you yourself know this Raj, but your ego doesn't let you accept it. Today, you are not yourself. When you didn't have success, weren't you happy. You were, because you had people to share those moments with you. They were your best friends, who had always stood by you in all good and bad days."

"Man is a social animal Raj. No person however successful, can live alone. One needs people to love him, be there with him. But you ruined everything with your own hands."

"You had the best of friends. They were always good to you. They were honest and loyal to you. But were you equally sincere towards them? They never felt jealous of you ever. But it was you who used to always look for instances to outperform them. That isn't true friendship my dear."

Friendship is not one sided. We all need people to love us. But very few are fortunate enough to get such people around them."

"Can you name one person in this world who loved you for what you were and as unconditionally as your mother did? Tell me Raj."

Professor's question fell on my ears, reached my soul, made my heart shrink and caused a tear to trickle from my eye.

I didn't have the answers to his question but within a minute my heart began to sink and within a flash I could find myself, knowing the answer but still not bringing the name to my lips.

Bursting in tears, I yelled, "No Sir, I never cheated on her. I couldn't love her and she never understood me. I was honest to her. Was that bad? If she loved me truly, she should have understood me, but she left me."

"That's where you were wrong. But I would never tell you. You should have figured that out for yourself," he said. "But I would surely tell you a few things, things that I have always believed and lived by. When a child is born, he doesn't know what he is. He is a void, knows nothing about this world or even himself. He opens his eyes, he smells his mother's fragrance and that's how he identifies if he is in his mother's lap or some stranger. He hears her words and that's how he starts feeling the world around him. When his mother calls him by his name, he chuckles on hearing her voice, whenever she cuddles him, pampers him, he feels important. When his father holds him in his arms and says calming words to make him stop crying, he realises that he is secure and identifies that he is important for his father. Thus, whatever he begins to feel about himself is what he perceives from the outside world. The feeling of being loved, being important to them comes from the people around him. Same happens as he grows older, goes to school. If the teacher appreciates him, he feels proud and a sense of accomplishment inculcates which makes him realise his potential, makes him think that he is capable of something. When he makes friends, he realises the qualities within him. And then so on in life, the ego develops which is nothing but merely a reflection of how others think about us. But it is different from our self. Self is what we are and very few realise it. But there is always a very thin line between self and ego. Self is what we actually are and ego is

what we start thinking or believing we are because of the perception that the world around us cultivates in us. We start thinking what others make us think about our own-selves, which though sounds ironical but is true and essential as well. But it is up to us, what reflection we imbibe within us.

People around us would show us different mirrors always. Some would always try and show us the picture that is fake but makes us happy because it somewhere soothes those instincts within us that drive us towards worldly things, be it fame, money etc. But there are always a few people who show us the mirror that gives us a true picture of ourselves. Those are the people who bring the good out of us so that we realise what truly lies within us. Such would be the people who would also make us familiar with the wrongs in us and make us overcome them. So in a way they bring us close to our real self. Thus, they narrow the gap between self and ego. And such people are the ones who are our true well wishers. About rest of the world, they would at times try to please you, say things that might make you feel happy, but with some motive behind it and that creates a wrong or what we say a negative ego in us. Such is the ego which takes us away from the real self. Imagine, it is the world around us that makes us realise what we are or what we aren't, but it is up to us to decide what to follow. As they say, good may never exist, if bad doesn't exist. If there is nothing bad, then how would one ever come to know what is good. Ego is necessary but when it goes beyond a limit it takes you far away from yourself, and you no more realise what you are, you are ruined as a person."

"This is what happened with you. You had people around you, who inculcated and extracted the best from you but you never valued them and ran after those who only leveraged the bad out of you. Chasing your dreams is right but losing your own self in the want of your dreams is wrong. The people who value you and are with you during your worst are the ones who would be genuinely happy for your success.

Always remember Raj, the whole world would be with you if you are successful, but very few would stand by you, in your worst. And he who disrespects such closed ones can never ever be successful in long run."

Putting his hand over my head, he said his last words to me, "That's what I had to tell you Raj. Rest you are a grown up man now. I am sure you would figure out for yourself."

Saying this, he just started moving towards the door.

I wanted to listen more of him and say more of mine but I couldn't and he left.

For quite some time, I sat there like a wounded soldier who couldn't do justice to his country and hence didn't even know if he could ever go back.

It was null and void, a sort of emptiness in me, I was numb.

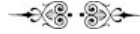
I gathered myself and began to move when I realised a note on the desk addressed to me.

But I was so numb that I didn't even open the envelope to see what was inside.

Broken and shattered, utterly lifeless I moved away from that place.

## Chapter 14

# Journey in Search of Self



Without even realizing where my feet took me, I found myself at the Vile Parle station.

Like a typical Mumbai local station, Parle station was no different. It was the same – swarm of people buzzing around. At the local station, one feels the true beat of Mumbai – a city whose life never stops and quite literally one can feel it, seeing hundreds of people – from rich to poor, students to workers, from white collared corporate working class to entrepreneurs like Dabbawalas, from hot college girls to hard working fish mongers, they all can be seen doing just one thing – Moving.

Breaking all man-made barriers of cast, color, creed, the local trains weave all into one string – and that’s why we call them, lifeline of this city.

At 9:35 p.m., with the announcement of the slow – local to CST, the waiting crowd at halt suddenly seemed to get all stirred up. The crowd ensured that I was dragged into the train coupe. That’s how it is, always.

Standing in the middle of the crowd, I stood like a statue. Relief came when after some twenty minutes a major chunk of passengers got down at the Wadala station. I grabbed the corner seat of the last row of the coupe. With the gush of air splurging through my hair, I didn’t realise when my eyes got shut.

Mahek stood there, smiling. Her smile, which always took my breath away, those gleaming eyes full of joy, that innocent look, ever so tender and pure, was all in front of me. She began to move towards me.

In seconds, she came close to me and simply landed into my arms.

“Raj, you will always find me around you. In you.”

The conviction and faith that was there in Mahek’s word, instilled some strength within me. We held each other tightly and with eyes shut, just swayed in the ocean of feelings, unaware of the world around us, we just knew that we were together. Snuggling into each other, I felt that perhaps the moment just stood by and transcended into a lifetime.

We were at a place where the formulation of tomorrow was laid. The place where our eyes had seen the beautiful dreams of the future.

“Saheb, Saheb...,” a husky voice distracted me. With a sudden pat on my lap, a small

boy, who was wiping the floor of the coach woke me up.

Within a flash, Mahek disappeared and I realised, it was a dream.

“This is the last station. GET DOWN. The train doesn’t go beyond this point,” he said.

“What place is this?” rubbing my eyes, I questioned him getting my nerve back on reality.

“KARJAT.”

Dream or Reality – Often a tough choice to make. Where the former tells us what we want to have, the latter tells us what we don’t have; but none tells WHEN and HOW???

“Was it God’s indication? Why KARJAT? Why this place? How?”

*‘Mahek, I need you. Everyone abandoned me, because you left me.’*

*‘Will I never ever get to see you again. You always said that no matter what, I shall always find you around me, but you seem to be nowhere near me. Where should I search for you?’* An inner plea I made to myself.

Guess, that is why they say, Memories may fade, but their traces never do.

It was then that I realised, if at all there could be a place where I could find Mahek, it was the place where our souls rested.

Getting down at the Karjat station was that hidden silent clue that may be God was giving me, to find some solace for myself.

Finally there was a destination to the aimless wanderer and the unknown roads I had taken.

Thus, I began to head towards the place. Broken and lifeless minutes ago, a sudden ooze of energy gushed in me, making my feet move.

With some 15-18 kms trek passing through the Ambivli village, I certainly had miles to go, and no time to sleep.

Mile by Mile, recollecting the memories of those good old moments spent with Mahek, I kept going.

Soon, after walking an hour or so, my legs began to ache. My feet were full of bruises, thanks to the leather formal shoes I was wearing. The extreme fingers of my feet were swollen with puss, which had now become extremely painful.

But this pain was perhaps much less compared to what was deep inside.

I thought to rest for a while under a huge shady tree. Past 10 hours my screwed up life had worn me out enough, rendering me almost lifeless. And now my body too was giving up on me.

Dying out of thirst, I laid below a tree. Food, money are all essentials, but water makes you realise it’s worth in survival more than anything else.

Unable to even sleep for a moment, I began to look for water around. To my luck, I spotted a well nearby. Sudden rush of energy got me into action to just run to the well as fast as I could. Guess, that’s what thirst can do to you.

But did I just think that God was done trying me out.

NO. Certainly not. Not yet.

The well had dried off. Not a patch of water in it.

Dejected, I fell on the ground.

Suddenly, a hand came from nowhere and held me just before I hit the rock floor.

“What happened Son? You seem thirsty,” a coarse voice added.

I simply gazed at him and moved my lips a little, but not making any sound. May be, even my words were tired to come out of my mouth.

He immediately offered me his bottle.

Without even wasting a second, I snatched it from his hand and gulped the indispensable life saving drops like anything.

The old man began to ask several questions like who I was, where I was from, where was I heading, etc. But his words fell flat on my ears as I wasn't able to register them into my mind.

After a few futile efforts, he eventually gave up on asking anything, he simply offered me to come over to his place for some food.

Strangely though, but this time his words triggered the right nerve impulse to my ears and brain. I accepted his offer with utmost alacrity.

Necessity, I guess, drives you and your actions. Hunger and thirst being the basic ones were enough to drive me at that very moment.

Just when I got up to start, a thought ran across my mind – “*Why is this stranger being so nice to me? Why would somebody be so concerned and helpful?*”

It was indeed unscrupulous of me, but then in the present times, the world around us is so bad that even if somebody tries to be good to you; you start thinking about their intentions. That's how we have become today. That's how the world had made us today.

But nevertheless, I had nothing to worry about. What was there to be worried about when I had nothing to lose? Devoid of everything, what was there that I would fear to lose? So, without introspecting or suspecting any bit further, I began to move with the strange old man.

Making our way through the farms and fields, we reached his house.

Bounded by some half broken cane fencing, marking a boundary to a small hut with walls made of red bricks without any coating of cement and plaster on it. Unlike the usual houses that I had seen, this one was different, at least for me. Never before had I seen how village houses looked. Without any segregation into rooms, hall and kitchen, this one was just a big hall – big would here mean, just a room and a half merged into one. That's what big means to village people. Within the room itself, was a corner which appeared as kitchen to me and considering how hungry I was, it was the first thing that I noticed about the house. On the other corner, was a mat laid on the floor next to a small wooden cloth weaved folding bed. This bit of house was perhaps the bed room.

As I ran my eyes around in the house, I noticed how simple these people were. A small fan, some utensils next to a *choolah*, a single folding bed and one big trunk, lying beneath it. To sum it, this was in totality what the entire house had. As I sat near the bed on the mat, folding my legs, I heard the old man call, ‘Savitri’ and heading towards the small farm outside the door.

Minutes later, an old lady in a serene pink cotton sari, with her head covered, entered the hut with a basket in her hands.

“Savitri, is my wife,” the old man said as he introduced me to her.

“This is a friend. He is hungry and has come from far. Please get some food for him,” he asked her.

Without a single question or much ado, she just began to cook.

I sat quietly in a corner and the old man started praying to God. In that small house, they had dedicated a small part to the holy house of God – a small *mandir*, which hosted some idols of Hindu Gods and a small white idol of ‘Sai Baba’.

I wondered, what for this man, has instilled so much faith and belief in God.

*What is it that he is thanking God for? He doesn't seem to be having anything at all, then what is it that makes him so content.*

Strange it was, but what was even stranger was the way the old man's wife kept staring at me again and again. She looked at me with some weird eyes. Eyes which had loads of affection – but why?

*‘I am a stranger. Never has this lady ever met or seen me before. Then why is she again and again gazing at me,’* I wondered.

After a while the old lady put some, ‘*sabji* and *aachar*’ on a chapatti and took it to the old man. Then both began to say some prayers and offered the food to God.

It was a serene feeling. They were offering the first morsel of food to God, before they themselves had it. May be, it was their usual norm. But then it didn't look as if they had enough to thank God for.

Once done with their offerings, the old lady got food for me and the old man. Being extremely hungry, I didn't even wait for them to tell me to start. I just logged on the food. Even though the food lacked variety and quality, yet that one meal was, perhaps the best I have ever had in my entire life.

As I hogged and ate each bite hurriedly, the old lady sat next to me, gazing deep into me, with her weird extremely affectionate eyes. She kept fanning me with a cane ‘Hand-Fan’.

Noticing that the rice in my plate was about to finish, she ran to get more. And again, I ate and ate. After calming down my hungry stomach, I stopped. The old lady then, after all the while staring at me, asked, “What's your name son?”

“Raj,” I replied.

“You look like my son. Doesn't he?” she asked her husband.

The old man just ignored her comment.

Considering the awkwardness of the situation, I asked her, “Why don't you also eat something.”

It felt like, I broke her dream. She said, “Yes *beta*, I will.” She winded up the utensils and went to the so called kitchen area.

“Why don't you relax for sometime son?” The old man said to me.

Ignoring his statement for a moment, I questioned him with a puzzled look, “What about your son, if I may ask you?”

“It is a long story son. It's Savitri, who brings out his name again and again. I understand, she is a mother, but she doesn't even try to forget him.”



“Sir, what is it? Where is your son?” I asked worriedly.

The old man took a deep sigh and then sat next to me, on the mat. I could make out that something was going on in his mind. I was confused. But more than that, I was anxious to know what it was all about.

Finally he started, “My father, his father and their forefathers, all have been farmers, that’s what destiny chose for us. We have been serving landlords for ages.

This piece of land that you can see from here, till the end where your eye goes, is Thakur Saheb’s property. He owns this village in a way. All these farms are his and we are just farmers employed by him. My father used to work on his farms and my mother used to serve in his house as a housemaid. She used to cook there and help Thakur Saheb’s wife in her household works.

Unlike other landlords, they were different. My father used to work for him, and he was always given due dignity. Though Thakur Saheb was firm on his principles, but he always treated people with respect, at least those who deserved it. Though, his enemies saw the worst in him. With my father, he was altogether a different person. My father, after working in his farms, often used to serve him at his house.

In a way, my entire family used to serve them all day long. And yes, whatever we did was paid back with due dignity and compensation. It never was a slave-master relationship. And serving them over the years, my father had rightfully earned respect for himself in Thakur Saheb’s eyes.

So, my entire childhood was spent in their big house. I used to go there with my mother, while she used to work there. They also had a son, ‘Arjun Singh’. As a kid, one never knows all those societal classes, the rich poor divide, and all those manmade evils around. So unaware of the fact that he was a rich dad’s son and all I was supposed to do was stay in my limits and serve him, the way my parents did, I became friends with Arjun. He too, oblivious to his stature just jelled into the bond of friendship with me. From playing with same toys to sharing good and bad moments together, we just began to grow as friends. I used to wait all day for him to come back from his school and play with me. His mother used to be kind enough to give me his clothes, used toys etc.

Often when my parents used to try and impose their thoughts on me of keeping away from him and not forget the fact that he is a rich master’s son, Thakur Saheb’s family always used to pamper me and tell my *Ma* not to ruin my tender mind and the serene friendship between me and Arjun with all these irrelevant societal norms.

In today’s world, though it seems like utopian stuff, but this was Thakur Saheb’s high thinking.

Arjun, too had bonded strongly with me. Perhaps, because he didn’t have any siblings, not even other friends. Slowly with course of time, our friendship grew stronger.

Whenever I used to fall sick, his mother used to ensure my medication. For that matter, if any crisis hovered over our family, Thakur Shaheb’s hand was always there to offer help and that too not as a favor or mercy, but with sheer dignity.

Years passed by and both I and Arjun grew older. He left for higher education. That’s when I realised that he was a rich man’s son and now was the time I should retrench

away. I thought that he wouldn't want to stay friends with a servant's son. That's what usually happens.

I began to help my father in the farm work and sharing other responsibilities.

Years passed by, I got married to Savitri. Then I heard that Arjun Singh was coming back to take charge of his father's business.

I began to fear now. Whether he would be the same Arjun Singh? Would he still remember our friendship and the sacred bond that we had? People around told me that things change and that he wouldn't even recognize me.

When he came back, he just hugged me, which broke all my fears and gave answers to all those stupid questions that had crept in my mind. Arjun, who could have just ignored me, being a rich father's educated son, in actuality still held the value for the serene bond of friendship that we had. Seeing his humility, I often used to wonder if at all people like him exist; if at all friendship is valued this much.

Then life moved on. I started a family. Arjun supported me in all my problems. He guided me to educate my son like he was his own son, so that he could have a bright future and not just spent his entire life serving others. With his support, my son graduated and even topped his college. Soon, he got a job in the town so he shifted there.

I never knew that even blood could someday turn thinner than water. When the time came, those hands, I held and taught to walk, abandoned me. My son settled in the city and began to regard us as a burden on him. We were like parasites for him, and when the disrespect and grief reached beyond our tolerance, I decided to come back to the village.

I took Savitri with me and came back. Broken by destiny and age, I almost thought that I could do nothing. But, again to that broken me, Arjun came as support. He told me that I could plough his piece of land, on which I could sustain my living. Giving me no other option but to accept his generosity, he wrote off a small piece of land to me."

"That was Arjun's love for me. A friend came to my rescue when my own blood ditched me and doomed me to a life of misery. But, God wanted to test me more and during that year it did not rain as much as it was required for a complete harvest. Drought stuck and our land was ruined. The entire crop got dried up and because of that, I had to re-plough the entire field. That meant a month's struggle to get the field again ready for the new crop. Everything would have been wasted if it didn't rain again. Each day, I kept praying to God to stop taking my test and have mercy on me."

"Arjun offered to help me monetarily, many a times, but my self-respect never let me take his help more than I already had. He had already done enough for me by giving me a house to live, paying for Savitri's medication, giving me means to earn my living on my own. I was already under his debt.

Me and my wife slogged to the limits and began to put our sweat and blood into making the crop harvest. All day, for endless hours we both worked on replenishing the soil and making it ready for re-plantation. And when everything was set, rains ditched us again. We were all shattered that day when contrary to our expectations, monsoons got delayed again. The fear of losing the crop started bothering me. Whatever we could do to suffice by artificial irrigation, we did. But rains were indispensable.

It seemed as if God ‘*Indra*’ was angry with us. Every single drop of water was life for the sowed crop and for us. Had this crop been spoiled too, I would have been ruined completely. This was my last and perhaps the only hope.”

“This is Life Raj, there comes a moment when you are on the verge of just giving up on everything, when all doors seem to be shut; it seems as if nothing is lined up ahead. One tends to feel that this is the end. All hopes within us just die. We stop believing in anything good. We stop believing in ourselves.

Remember Raj, Life goes on as long as there is hope. People say, we die when our breath dies out, but the truth is... we die the day, hope dies within us. I too was on the brink of giving up. Rather, I and Savitri were dead the day our own son left us in lurch subjecting us to this grief. But I never gave up. In those tough times, my friend Arjun stood beside me and held me from falling down. He instilled a new hope in me to fight it out. Giving up is always the easiest option, Raj. But, putting the blame on destiny and fate, and castigating God for everything bad happening to us is not the way to go. There is always light at the end of a dark tunnel, and it is always on us to fight our way out and emerge victorious, and those who cannot, just crib about the darkness.”

“I made a way out of that darkness. Yes, the faith in God and strength of Savitri and Arjun’s friendship were the two pillars that held me strong and they were there because that’s what all I had earned all my life – Relationships. Though the grief of parting away from my son will always be there, but that doesn’t put an end to my life. No, we will not let it.”

“Raj, I saw you looking with those anxious and perplexed eyes when I was thanking the almighty. These relationships, is what I was expressing my gratitude for,” the old man ended on a smiling note.

He narrated his bit, but it left a deeper trace within me.

“Go to sleep, my son. Its late and you must be very exhausted,” he said while getting up.

They slept. But the old man’s words kept echoing in my ears.

An inner voice within me was screeching aloud, ‘*Was my grief the biggest in this world to have made me give up everything? Wasn’t it cowardice to have given up? What did I earn? What was it that I was running after all this while?*’ Amidst all these inner voices, I passed into slumber.

Some hours later, I got up. To my surprise I found a thin blanket over me. Stitched in bits and pieces, it was perhaps the only one they had. I folded it and covered it on that old lady.

She had not eaten anything the other night because I ate what all she had and she gave her share to me just like any mother would.

For a moment, I felt like giving them some money as a token of gratitude, but then refrained, thinking that it would belittle what all they did for me.

It was priceless.

I touched their feet and left their hut. With a last gaze at them, I recalled his words, ‘*Life was never thought to be difficult but then who wanted it to be easy.*’

With that thought invoking my inner strength, I headed towards my destination – Peth fort. The place, where Mahek's, memories awaited me. Where, the Raj I had lost was to be found.

The anxiety to reach my destination was growing stronger and stronger in me. So I stood there, recalling all that the villagers told me when I had enquired them for directions to Peth Fort. I wasn't able to understand which road was I supposed to take.

Standing on that cross-road, I suddenly saw a bike coming from the other side of the road.

It was like a ray of hope. Rather to me, it was the entire sun of hope.

Within minutes, the bike came and stopped near me.

A young fellow sitting on it asked me, "Are you looking for a ride?"

"No, I have lost my way," I replied.

"Happens. In life, we all tend to lose our way. That is God's way of making us realise the righteous path," he said in a very calm and soothing demeanor.

I got a little surprised.

"If God didn't show us the bad, we would never realise the good. So, whatever happens, has a purpose. We don't know, but the almighty knows, my friend. He knows it all," he said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I need to know which of these roads would lead me to Peth Fort."

"Oh, great. I am going that way. I can give you a ride, if you want," he started the engine.

"Thank you. Thank you so much sir," I reverted in a tone full of excitement.

"My pleasure," he said.

"I don't know, if I hadn't found you, how I would have made my way to the destination. You don't know how big a help you have been to me at this moment," I said, sitting on his bike.

"God, helps his children some way or the other, my friend," he said.

We reached Peth Fort in no time.

"By the way, what's your name sir," I asked as he started his bike.

"You know me. You know me well." Looking, right into my eyes and gearing up his bike, he smiled and said, "Krishna".

And, within a flash, he rushed away on his bike.

I stood there stunned for a while, but couldn't get what just happened to me.

## Chapter 15

# Retrospection: The Last Lap

*“Dreams that we see today,  
make the memories that we live tomorrow,  
And, memories that we remember,  
make what dreams we see today.”*



*“Raj, you understand it? See, I have always believed that our past shapes our present and our present shapes our future. So, life is such, that each and every phase has its own significance. Thus, it’s important to always ensure that you make good memories, which when we cherish, inspire us to dream better and work towards making them true to create even better memories for the future.”*

Those were Mahek’s words.

Simple, pure and truly positive; this was Mahek, in every way.

She was so innocent in her thinking, that at times I feared for her because never in life had she ever thought bad for anybody, nor something of that sort had ever happened to her. What if someday, God forbid, something bad happens to her? This always made me pray for her. I never knew what would happen if she ever came across the cruel side of Life. She believed that God would never do bad to her, as long as she didn’t do bad to anybody. In real sense, she believed in karma and followed it too.

Who knew, the person who always prayed well for her, would be the one who would bring her face to face with the bitterness of life. I did. But then no matter what people say, no matter what I say, what matters is, did she deserve what all happened to her?

The simple answer to this is, No. But...

Was it all under anyone’s control? The answer is again, No.

People aren’t bad, but circumstances at times make them bad. It’s something that I read somewhere. But that’s not something that we can use as a shield for justifying our wrong doings.

The real question is if I knew I was wrong, what kept me blind all this while.

The simplest answer to this is... the ego that was there inside me. Ego is true. And it’s all whimsical and stupid of those who claim themselves to be saint and all good, and

devoid of any ego. It's a façade. Everybody has ego, in some form or the other, rather everybody should have ego. It is needed and is a must.

But how much, is what the real catch is.

I had more, Rahul & Rohan had less, and Mahek may be had the least, but each of us had it.

Ego, if more intense, makes a person egotistical. However, if I could have kept it under control, I may have been a little less selfish.

Rohan and Rahul were the best of friends I could have ever asked for. Since childhood days, we had been together. It was a friendship that had made its place in our hearts over the years.

But the evil ego, had another vice to it. I was egotistical and thus saw others likewise.

Rohan and Rahul were my well wishers, but conceit made me see the same in them as well. And that is the reason, when I got success I thought they would be envious of me. But actually, I always saw a more pronounced egoistic part of me in them. *How can they have more than me? Why did they become more famous than me? Why do they have something that I don't have?* Such thoughts hovered me all the while, be it the academic accomplishments, or the ones pertaining to the personal life.

It was nothing that they ever tried to portray, but I saw that only.

When I accomplished something, my pride and ego made me blind and forced me into making unwise choices and rash decisions, which ruined me and the brotherhood between us.

I don't know, what had happened to me, but yes, I shouldn't have felt what I felt and I shouldn't have said what all I said.

But words once spoken can't be retrieved.

Mahek too had ego, but it was manifested in the form of self respect and self esteem in her. But with me, even that had gone for a toss. She kept on doing so many things for me, taking care of me, even after I had broken all her dreams with a single blow. That was what hurt her ego and above all her self-esteem. That's what, I guess, love can do to you. It makes you lose respect in your own eyes. May be she loved me so much that she just didn't choose to let her ego come in between and overpower her love for me.

As all cupids preach and say, when you love someone, never let your ego come in between.

At one place Mahek didn't let her ego ruin her love, here I was, whose love only ruined his ego. I loved Shruti, so when she refused to come back to me and just left me in lurch, my ego got hurt. I couldn't take how could she do that to me, how could she not value me, and just leave me all over again. I couldn't take it and that's where the turnaround began.

I became frustrated. The feeling grew stronger within me, and I needed to take it out at somebody.

Rather, I wanted to punish my own self. I felt that I was responsible for letting my respect go and thus I wanted to punish myself for it. And, the way I chose to do this was by taking myself away from it all and not to get into any relation at all.

Thus, I decided to tell Mahek that I cannot be with her. My ego was hurt and I wanted to hurt my own self for that.

I started thinking all relations are like that and loving somebody would mean keeping your respect at stake. In this hurt of ego, I became blind to Mahek's true love.

All that while, I kept professing to Mahek that I loved Shruti more and that was the reason I couldn't love Mahek but the real reason was, I couldn't ever digest that I got dumped.

My hurt self-respect poked me more and more and forced me to satisfy it by doing the same with somebody else.

I hurt Mahek and eventually when it went beyond her tolerance and respect, she just decided to leave.

It happens when you have something, you feel you deserve it and you are simply meant for it. So, that thing eventually loses value for you and you take it for granted and it's only when you lose something that you realise its worth.

It is not the first time I am thinking over this *funda*. So many times I have heard this from numerous sources but the irony is, that's how human nature is.

And knowing fully well, this happened. I had Mahek so I never valued her, and when I lost her, I started feeling the void.

I knew this somewhere deep inside but I was not ready to confess it. And when Rohan and Rahul tried to make me realise the same, I got peeved up because I knew I was wrong, but never wanted it to hear from others.

I never actually had the guts to face Mahek because despite all the deceit, all the sorrows I showered on her, she was still nice to me, which began to prick my conscience and made it more difficult for me, to go and apologize.

The last lines of Mahek, in her letter, that she would never forgive me, kept making my guilt even more inciting and painful. I had already fallen in my own eyes and by this I knew, I had fallen in hers as well.

Guilt is something that kills a person from within. I knew I had done a mistake. I admitted it. In my confusion I had screwed up things for Mahek too. As long as she was there, I felt some solace and my guilt never overpowered me. But the fact that she didn't understand me and left me, made my guilt rise.

I would have tolerated the entire world thinking bad about me, but all that mattered to me was that she should be convinced what I did and why I did it all. And when she left, I knew she would never forgive me.

*Love and infatuation*, these are the two words which I guess, I could never understand.

I never understood the difference between them; had I understood, life would have been different, easier probably.

*Infatuation is always overrated, while love is often under-estimated.*

Same was the case with me. I never realised when I started perceiving my infatuation as love.

The truth is that there is nothing as they say love at first sight. Never does it happen.

Infatuation is the first step or stage in the cycle of love.

Infatuation is when you don't know a person, yet you just are attracted to him/her. Does that mean that infatuation is an illusion? No, it would be wrong to say that.

Infatuation however may or may not turn into love. It is governed by 'The Law of Infatuation' which states – When you are infatuated towards a person, you are at first attracted by the looks and personality and that's how two people come together. Then over the period of time, when they start enjoying each other's company is when they tend to approach towards love, but not true love. It's never equal on both sides.

No two people in any relation, be it a mother – child, brother – sister, or for that matter a girl – boy relation, equally feel for each other. There is always one person who loves or cares or feels more than the other. The one who feels more, is the one who is more into the relation, and is the one who gets dominated by the other, who becomes dominant. But, it cannot be said that the other person doesn't feel that way. It is just that the quantum is a little less.

But the problem starts when 'The Law of Dominance' takes its toll, and the dominant person on getting more love from the other, starts to feel that he/she deserves it and when this person starts feeling that whatever reciprocation he is getting from his counterpart, is all what he deserves, the hunger for more, begins. And this way, one starts feeling that he/she needs something or rather deserves something even better. The moment this thought creeps in, is the time, the relation starts losing its worth.

It is human nature and happens with most of us.

So if people say one should be with the person who loves you, rather than whom you love, is absolutely right. One can only be happy being the dominant of the two in the relation.

But, if everyone went that way, then probably relationships won't ever be possible. Because, one of the two, has to be recessive.

My case was no different.

I got attracted to Mahek because of her charm and personality. Though she wasn't my type, but still, her aura attracted me. As I started spending more and more time with her, I began to know her more. I began to know her shortcomings and she came to know mine. And thus we began to come close to each other.

We came closer and closer and I started feeling that it was love.

For Mahek, the quantum of this love was far more and hence she accepted me with all my shortcomings. She loved me for what I was. But it wasn't the same from my side. Though, it makes me sulk now, but it's true.

Hence, I was more vulnerable to deviate from that love.

Thus, when Shruti came back, my vulnerability was exploited. And I called 'that' love. I began to feel what I felt for Shruti long back, while I failed to admit what I felt for Mahek. I got confused between the two.

The irony is, I couldn't differentiate between love and infatuation.

And since I was the dominant in the relation, I being more vulnerable got deviated. Hence, Shruti happened and Mahek was dumped.



The hard truth is that, I couldn't understand what love is. And amidst this confusion, I hurt Mahek and forced her away from me.

She too after a point, gave up and left me. But after losing her, I realised what she meant to me.

If despite all her shortcomings, she mattered to me, then for sure that was what true love was and in that case Shruti was just my infatuation.

The saddest part is, I was too late in realizing this.

But now, here I am, a changed Raj. The Raj, who knows himself.

I know today, what love is. I know now what friendship is. But the penance is, though I know I was wrong, I still can't undo what I had done.

The people who meant to me, rather for whom I meant the most are no more there. The worst penance that God can give us is that, we know we had what we needed, but because of our foolishness, we lose it forever.

I got myself back, but would I ever be able to get those people back.

*Would I ever be able to see Mahek ever again, even once? Would I ever be able to go up to her and tell her how much I love her? Would I ever be able to stand in front of Rohan and Rahul and tell them that I need them by my side, all my life?*

These are the questions, I don't have an answer to.

"God, I know you forgave me because you got me back to life. I am living again, but would I be able to live without them all," I spoke to myself and thinking the same just closed my eyes.

Suddenly, a drop of rain fell on my face and then another and so on. It started raining suddenly. *'At this time of the year, it never rains. Then how come today'*, I kept wondering.

To clear those drops, I put my hand inside my pocket to take out my handkerchief but instead, I discovered a piece of paper in my pocket. It was the note that Tripathi Sir left for me on the table, but in my dilemma I never opened it till this point of time.

I opened it to see what was written in it.

It said –

*'Life doesn't end, as long as every rain drop is a hope...'*

I smiled. Tripathi Sir had always taught me, rain drops bring new hope. Just as they bring hope to the farmers, just as they bring life to the seeds sown in soil, just as they bring happiness to the thirsty desert. In succinct words, a rain drop indicates hope of a new start towards a better future. Just the way, each drop falling on the ground resurrects to life, in various forms, the same way it teaches us the virtue of resilience.

I kept smiling and got up with the thought in my mind that life isn't over yet. I would someday meet them all for sure.

As I believe,

*Every dawn is a beginning to an end;*

*Every dusk is an end to a new beginning;*

*What we forget is; Between the two: We actually move from one to the other.*

That is what Life is all about. That is what it should be about. If life doesn't stop, why

should we.

So, I gathered myself and decided to move back, back to face the challenges in life and make a move from this end to a new beginning.

Just as I turned around, I saw three people standing far away, Mahek, Rahul and Rohan.

## Epilogue

*Dear Raj,*

*You somehow always love to shock me na... Right? Don't you.*

*Once again, you did the same.*

*That day, when I, Rohan and Rahul came to see you off at the CST station, I was convinced that you won't turn around even once. May be this time, I didn't even wanted you to. But then you had to prove me wrong.*

*Thanks to you, Rohan won that bet from me.*

*I know, even now sitting in your cosy glass windowed office, peeping out of the window at the planes taking off and landing every next minute, the sadist in you would be chuckling to hear this.*

*Jokes apart, hope you are enjoying every bit of your Life, as you always dreamt of. Makes me happy to see that your dreams finally came true.*

*That day while waving to us, as the train moved, you kept looking at us till the train crossed the end of the platform. With tears in our eyes, we just couldn't see you part ways.*

*Perhaps, it was difficult for all, to part away with a part of us.*

*Never could... all this while... but I wanted to ask you one thing: What were you up to that day? Did you even think for a minute that there are people for whom you mean something? Did you even think about your parents?*

*That night, Rohan called me. He told me that you went missing and asked if I knew where you were? I was taken aback. For a minute, it felt like I had lost you. Within a minute, I just drove to the college and picked both of them and began to look for you.*

*On the way, Rahul narrated each bit of what all happened between you guys after I left. Millions of unpleasant thoughts ran across my mind. Each minute, we kept praying for your safety.*

*From Nitesh, Preeti, and even Debby; from all our hang outs to every damn place in the city we kept searching for you. After endless efforts, Rohan broke down telling that we have lost you.*

*Unable to accept that, some inner voice pricked that it can't be true. Just then I thought we would take a last chance. I knew then, there is one place which was my last ray of hope of finding you.*

*Immediately, I drove to Pethfort with them.*

*Those drops of rain swayed the tears that kept rolling from our eyes, the moment we saw you sitting there. But I never had the words to say it out and we never had time. After we came back, the only thing in our mind was to focus on the exams. I*

*remember this time, more than you, Rahul was worried for your exams. He made all the notes for you. Strange though.*

*But Raj, what I felt inside was different. Never did we speak about it all this while. A lot was said, yet so much was unsaid between the two of us.*

*Love happens, happens at least once. Some people have it in their lives that they get the love of their lives and then destiny and God takes it to the climax. But not all are born this lucky. But that doesn't stop us from believing in it.*

*I loved. The first time, I felt what this feeling is. You made me feel it.*

*We both happened. Then we both parted. Perhaps that was destined.*

*I kept blaming you. When couldn't be strong enough, thought easier would be to quit and go away. Was cowardly of me. But then love makes us vulnerable. I surrendered to my feelings, you surrendered to yours.*

*Does that make either of us wrong? Does that make our love wrong?*

*No.*

*When I couldn't kill my feelings, I thought of withdrawing before it killed me. And when you couldn't kill yours, you moved away.*

*I blamed you. You blamed me. Life was blamed. God was blamed. Circumstances were.*

*What we both forgot is that blaming circumstances is always easier than to fight them out. Giving up ruined us, more than fighting it out would have. And as I always told you, everything happens for a reason. I still believe it.*

*And now, we all are heading to a new journey. New people would come. New friends would come. New troubles would also come. But what lessons life taught us, shall always help us fight our battles and emerge victorious. Isn't it.*

*Yesterday, had a word with Rohan on Skype. He is all settled in his Dad's business, though cribs a little about the daunting expectations of his typical Business minded Dad, but still managing things pretty well. Rahul has gone back home for his sister's wedding. Would be joining back next week. He has got an onsite project which might take him to Brazil soon. We all are missing you.*

*And before I close, the last question that you asked me before leaving: 'If Mahek and Raj could happen again?'*

*Well, to that I would say, if Love never ends, Hope also shouldn't.*

*Take Care*

*Love*

*Mahek.*

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*... I Love you Rachu ...*

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