



From the best selling author of "I Am Heartless"

VINIT K. BANSAL



Soulmates

LOVE WITHOUT OWNERSHIP

Soulmates... Love Without Ownership

Vinit K. Bansal

... I Love you Rachu ...

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Prologue

I walked through the damp, dingy corridor of the city jail. The jail was as old as the city itself. The walls of the hallway had discoloured with age. Wet moss had plastered themselves onto all sides. The hallway had dim lighting with head bulbs hung on the ceiling every few feet. One couldn't differentiate between day and night, once inside the hallway. I made my way past the official rooms and past officers in khaki uniforms. The chief jailor's office was at the far end of the hallway. When I entered the office, I noticed that the interior of the office was stark different from the outside. The office was well furnished and boasted of a very well maintained décor. The chief jailor sat on his desk in the middle of the room. He was a heavy built man of around 50. We shook hands and the chief asked me a few questions. He had to sign some official documents after which I was permitted entry to the prison cell as a special visitor.

At 24, I, Rajiv Bhattacharya am the youngest reporter at my news channel and a promising one too. This was going to be the most challenging assignment since my joining the firm over a year ago. I was going to exclusively interview a criminal, a murderer to be precise.

“Don't be nervous, the chap isn't going to murder you”, I thought to myself as I crossed the old hall into the building where the prison cells were situated. I observed the surroundings around me. The dark halls, the semi lighted rooms; the cold air that hung around gave the place a strange eerie feeling. Not somewhere a sane human would like to spend his life, for sure. But that is how prisons were supposed to be, weren't they?

I mused as I put my signature on the visitor's register and walked into cell number 42. The bearded cell guard locked the gate behind me.

Number 56 was sitting quietly.

In the prison, no one knew anyone's name. They did not have one. Everyone was a number. The number printed on the breast pocket of each one's prison uniform. That is how everyone was addressed. He was hunched on his iron bed with his back to where I was standing. Just above him on the wall, hung a tiny mirror, big enough to get a view of one's hair and eyes. To the right of the bed, there was a wooden desk and a chair made of iron. There stood two photo frames on the desk. On one was a photo of a middle aged woman. The picture looked fairly new. The other frame contained a picture of a young girl. Pretty! I did not cease from observing. Big, black round eyes and a captivating smile. The photo seemed very old, pale at the edges. I noticed that some torn areas had been carefully fixed with cello-tape. I looked around the tiny prison cell. Barring the desk and the chair, there existed a tiny high rise window, a light bulb and a small wash basin at the corner. That was all. I had already started to feel claustrophobic and looked at the man who was still sitting quietly on the bed. I coughed. The man did not turn.

“Umm... Hi. I am Rajiv. Rajiv Bhattacharya, reporter at BBP news. We had an interview scheduled.” I let my words trail off.

“I know. Please sit down. They have given me a small but comfortable place in here.” He guffawed as if he found the joke amusing. The voice was young but had hints of tiredness at places. I took my place on the iron chair beside the bed and fished out a notepad and a tape-recorder from my backpack.

“So, what do you want to know?” he said, finally turning around to face me. Immediately, I was taken aback. Criminal number 56 was a striking contrast to what I had expected. A lanky body supported an innocent looking face. He had deep set hazel eyes behind a pair of frame-less glasses. A tiny smile that constantly played on his chapped, brown lips only added to his childlike features. His hair was unruly and unkempt and there were slight stubbles on the face indicating the reappearance of a recently shaved beard.

“This guy can't be a murderer.” A sudden thought flashed in my head.

“Yeah, I don't look like one, do I?” spoke number 56.

I was visibly startled. I was more than one hundred percent sure I had spoken in my mind. How on earth could the man know what I had been thinking? Had he read my mind?

“Uhh, what?” I managed to mutter.

“I don't look like a criminal, that's what you have been thinking, right?” Number 56 let out a small laugh. “A lot of people find it hard to believe too. Ah, destiny, destiny. Who knows what it can make of a person. Would you believe me if I said I was innocent, Mr. Rajiv Bhattacharya from BBP news?”

I glanced at those deep set hazel eyes once again. There was a strange sense of calmness in them, much like what a monk possesses. Not an iota of guilt. I found an uncanny honesty within them. Something that was so unconventional of a typical criminal. Yet he was accused. There were evidences and his own confession to killing his best friend.

At that time I knew I had to now know the complete story. Something from within told me that this interview was going to be more than just an assignment for me.

“I believe only the truth”, I spoke.

Number 56 looked up at me with that same childlike smile.

“I am not a criminal.”

“But you did confess to your crime in front of the court, didn't you?” I asked.

Number 56 coughed.

“Pass me that bottle of water, will you?” he indicated towards the desk.

“Yes, I did.” He continued, as he took a couple of gulps of water. Clearing his throat, he looked back at me. “I confessed to murdering my best friend. But does that make me a criminal?”

I scratched my head, “Either this guy had lost his mind or he is a terrific actor” I thought to myself, this time very slowly. I was afraid the man would read my mind again. Yet I didn't know why but I found myself getting attracted to the guy's words. For an unknown reason, I found myself wanting to believe whatever the man spoke.

I stood up from the chair. I went over to the man and sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I want to know the story, your complete story, Neel”, I spoke slowly and carefully.

Number 56 stared at me. Perhaps, in all these months in the prison, he had become so much accustomed to being called by the number on his uniform that he had forgotten what his real name was – Neel Gupta. For him, it sounded so strange now, after such a long time. I was looking at him too. It was like both of us were trying to de-tangle the strange connection that we had been feeling towards each other. Both of us seemed to find a little bit of ourselves in the other's personality.

“No one has ever called me by my name here. To them, I am a mere number, as is everyone else in this jail”, he muttered, his hazel eyes showing hints of moist.

“I wish to know your story, Neel. Will you share it with me?”

Number 56 leaned on the wall behind him. He closed his eyes. He let himself metamorphose back from a number to a name. He remained silent for the next couple of minutes.

'But is silence always silent? Not all the time.' First time in my life, I felt that.

“I don't want to share my story with anyone. You may go now. And yes, thanks for reminding me my name.” Neel uttered calmly. His eyes were still closed.

I waited for some more minutes but he was unmoved. I had no other option left than to leave. For the next few days, I kept on trying to convince Neel for sharing his story with me but nothing worked out. By now, I had understood that there must be something which has been stopping Neel. Something, his lips were not able to speak but at the same time the eyes couldn't hide. I was dying to know that something. I then decided to get to the bottom of the truth through external sources. It took me more than 3 months to know the story behind Neel turning into a murderer.

Three months Later-

On a Thursday morning I returned to the jail. This time, I was much more confident after a deep investigation and wide spread search about Neel and his life. According to me, I had got the niche of the case. Winter wind howled through the atmosphere. The sun had given up on its effort to shine through the thick layer of white clouds. It was extremely cold. I was wearing a white shirt with a black suit, a thick over jacket and a bag slung

across my right shoulder. When I entered the prison I observed that Neel was sitting alone, separate from the other prisoners. He was looking untidy, as if he had not groomed himself since a long time. He was wearing a grimy jail dress. When he saw me entering into the cell, he turned around; as if he wanted to ignore me.

“Hello! Neel!! How are you?” I greeted him.

Neel did not respond. He was simply facing the wall, standing with his hands clasped.

I went near him and greeted him once again. This time he was an enigma.

“Please go away, I do not wish to discuss anything with you.” Neel said in an unchanged position.

“Neel, the world outside wishes to hear about your life, our news channel wishes to publish an interview of yours. Please hear me out once.”

“No one is waiting for me outside; it's just another story for you, your news channel and the world. They will watch it, talk about it and forget it. It's my life and I don't wish to reveal it to you.” Neel said, raising his voice.

“Eight Years back! University of Jaipur, Neel was in love and so was Aditi. She was his life, he was her love. But...”

“How do you know Aditi? What do you know? Why are you so interested in knowing about me?” Neel turned around and interrupted. His eyes were wide open.

“Let me complete, Neel... I promise you that she will be your life. I know everything about you. But I want to hear the same from you.”

“Aditi!!” Neel whispered. Tears had begun to shed off his eyes. They were filled with pain. It seemed that someone had pricked his heart! I offered him a glass of water but he denied. He was ripped off.

For the next few moments there was utter silence in the cell.

“10th July, 2006, the train was moving ahead swiftly for the creation of my life. But, I was stepping for destruction.” Neel began to speak.

I, who was thinking of leaving back from the cell, took out my camera in haste and began to record the most inexplicable interview of my life.

Chapter 1

The train was late by an hour and a half. By the time I reached the university gates, it was already late evening and the gates were locked. The tiny little gatekeeper in his khaki uniform carrying a rifle heavier than his weight looked at me with a scorn. The gatekeeper asked me to come back the next morning.

“But it is the last day for the registrations. Otherwise, I'll have to pay a fine tomorrow.” I said to the gatekeeper meekly.

“Is that my problem? You should have come on time. Now, don't stand and argue with me. I can't let you in after office hours.” The man replied irritatingly.

I looked through the bars of the iron gate. The lights of the office room were still on. Maybe some officials were still there. I knew I had a little chance even though the official timings for the registrations had been over. I tried to reason with the gatekeeper once again.

“Actually my train was late by couple of hours. This is why I got late. It is not my fault. Please, it is very important that I get my registrations done today. I don't even have a place to stay right now. Please bhaiya, just let me in.”

“Can't you understand? It's against the rules. I cannot let you in. Get the hell out of here now.” The gatekeeper was now standing up from his brown wooden stool and glaring at me.

He then walked towards me. “Go, go now. Come in the morning. There is no point staying here at this time.” He raised his voice. He held my arm and tried forcing me out.

A curtain slid across the window of the office room. A voice called out, “What is the problem, Ram Lal? Why are you screaming?”

“Nothing, sahib. It's a boy wanting to get in for the registrations now. I am driving him away.”

“Send him in. I was just closing the files. I can accommodate one student.”

“Ji, sahib.”

“You should thank your stars today. Sahib looks in a good mood. He wouldn't have allowed you in otherwise.” Ram Lal spoke.

“Thank you, bhaiya!” I smiled and picked up my luggage as I entered into the grounds inside.

I put down my old VIP suitcase and backpack at the door of the office and knocked on the door.

“Come in.” The voice called.

I walked inside the office. The person at the desk was bent over a pile of forms and papers.

“Why are you late? Aren't you aware of the registration timings?” the man asked without looking up.

“I am sorry, sir, but actually my train...” I responded immediately.

“Get me those files from that table”, the man clearly was not interested in listening to my problems.

I looked to my side and walked over to the other table stacked with green files. I picked up the bundle and kept it on the man's desk.

The man continued to open files, scribble something on them and close them. Occasionally, he typed something on the monitor on his desk. I watched him silently. Assuming he would be busy for a while, I looked around the office. From the open window at the side, I could see the main university building. Dark except for a dim light coming from the night lights on the terrace.

“My home for the next three years.” I sighed as I thought of my home and my mother. I belonged to a middle class family. My dad was a government clerk and my mother was a homemaker. I had studied hard and had gained a scholarship which halved my fees. I knew I had to continue working hard and make something of myself in the next three years.

The man finally completed the last file and slumped it on the desk. He then poured himself a glass of water from the jug on the table and gulped it down.

“Name?” The man asked.

I was jerked from my thoughts and turned to look at the man.

The man raised his eyebrows.

“Naam batao, bhai?”

“Umm... Neel, Neel Gupta, sir.” I replied, finally relieved that the wait was over.

The man typed something on the computer and took out a print out of a form.

“Fill up this form and put your signature here.”

I did as I was told. The man then opened a cabinet on his desk and after a little cluttering, took out an identity card and a strap and a document of hostel allotments. He handed it over to me and got up to arrange everything around him.

“Thank you, sir!” I smiled gratefully. The man did not reply. I waited for a moment and then turned to leave. I picked up the backpack at the door, swung it around my back, picked up my old VIP and walked down the steps.

Out on the grounds, I looked at my watch. It was 8:15 pm. Suddenly, I felt hungry and

realized that I hadn't eaten anything since the morning. I decided to first reach my room, freshen up and then go out to have something from the canteen. I began walking towards the boy's hostel area. The boy's hostel was situated at a distance from the main administrative building. As per the directions given by the man at the office, I had to walk half a kilometre, then cross the staff residential quarters and take a back route from there which would bring me to the hostel. I was badly tired from the journey and my stomach was churning from hunger. I continued walking and finally after a little over ten minutes, I could see the staff residential quarters. "Just a little further." I thought to myself. After taking a left turn into an alley, I arrived at some kind of a back route. The road was dark with no sign of any vehicle or a person nearby. "He must have given me a shortcut." I continued walking through the lane. My only guiding light was the overhead moon. As I took another turn to my right, I suddenly heard something. I swung around quickly. Not a thing moved as far as my eye could see. Then I heard it again. I must be hearing voices. It came from somewhere further down the street. My heart skipped a bit, thinking about some unknown danger.

"Who's there?" I called out into the night. There was a voice of running footsteps and some commotion. I began running towards the noise. The voice was closer now. Someone was in pain. Now I paced up my speed. The heavy luggage and my tired legs were making it difficult for me to run. I crossed two more turns, stopping at each one to listen. The voice was still further down. I was now running as fast as my legs could carry me. "Who is it? Who is it?" I kept calling out loudly into the dark. Halfway down the street, I stopped short in my tracks. The sight in front of my eyes was terrifying. On the ground, lying covered in mud and blood was a boy. His head was bleeding profusely and his right eye was swollen. Lying on the ground next to him was a couple of hockey sticks. The guy seemed young, same age as me. He was murmuring something. I looked around. Not a single other person. They might have fled hearing my voice. I bent down and felt the guy's pulse. Slow.

I acted swiftly. I took out my handkerchief from my pocket and bent over to lift the man's head a little. I then tied the handkerchief tightly around the wound on the man's head. "It should stop the blood flow for a while." I thought. Then I brought my fingers near the man's nose. He was breathing. I took out the plastic bottle from my backpack and uncapped it. I bent over again, lifted the boy's head and tried to make him gulp down some water. The person was in a semi-conscious state. He was constantly murmuring something. He managed to gulp down a little water down his throat. I next began checking the man's pocket for some identity card or papers. The man winced as my hand rubbed against his left arm. I touched it. He must have broken a bone or something. I began fidgeting with the man's back pocket. On the right back pocket of his jeans, I found a purse with some money in it and a couple of papers and visiting cards. Luckily, there were some contact numbers jotted on it. I immediately dialled up a number. No response. Again, I tried another number. No one picked it up either. I did not know what to do. Time was running out and the man's condition was worsening. I had to act fast. I remembered that I had the number of the man at the office. I quickly dialled it. After

telling the man my name and that I was the one who had just registered himself, I quickly explained to the man the full incident. The man at the other end told me to immediately take the guy to the university's medical centre which was just a block away from the present location, while he would inform the police immediately. I agreed and put down the call. "A block away. Shouldn't be too difficult." I mused. I glanced at the guy lying on the road. Picking up my backpack and VIP, I tried to help the man to his feet. He was weak and bloodied and couldn't get up properly. "Just a block away my friend, c'mon, be with me." I whispered to the guy. I made the man lean onto my shoulders and slowly began walking. "Just a little further friend, you will be fine, just keep walking." I kept on encouraging him in whispering tones. After about 5 minutes, we reached the main gate of the medical centre. A ward boy coming down the steps saw us and immediately brought in a stretcher. Together, we pulled the guy onto the stretcher and carried him to the emergency room.

My body was aching with exhaustion. While the doctors started operating the boy, I slumped down on the seat outside the emergency room and waited. I closed my eyes. Before me I saw - my mother, smiling down at me... my father, adoring me. In no time, I had fallen into deep slumber.

"Mr. Neel? Hello...wake up." A jerk on my shoulders jolted me up from sleep.

"Huh-uh? Yes..." I opened my eyes quickly, confused.

I then looked up to see a police inspector along with two assistants standing beside me. There was also the official whom I had met in the registration office. I looked at my watch. 10:30 pm.

"Ah, yes, sorry I fell asleep... Is he all right now?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"Yes, he has been operated upon and is recovering now. We have to record your statement if you don't mind." the inspector said.

"Yes, okay." I replied and the police inspector sat down beside me to record my statement.

After about an hour, I was done with the police proceedings. I sat with the man from the office, Mr. Balram, as I later found out.

"He's out of danger now. His friends have come to see him. We had informed them." Mr. Balram said as he sipped his coffee brought from the machine at the hospital reception.

"Thank God, he is safe." I took a sigh of relief.

"It was very brave of you. Ranadeep is a very well known figure in the college. He must have gotten into some nasty fight with some other gang." Mr. Balram continued.

I looked up from paper cup in which Mr. Balram had brought coffee for me.

"Gang?" I asked, puzzled.

“Yes, the college has many student unions. Some of them have turned into dangerous gangs and keep fighting with each other. Ranadeep's father is a big contractor, politician and a well-known personality in this area. Ranadeep himself is a part of one union. Big influential family, you know. Loads of money. God knows how much is earned by the right means.” Mr. Balram said as if he was talking to himself only.

I was now sitting in a state of sudden shock. A number of thoughts seemed to be impelling within my mind. I was a simple and a decent boy who belonged to a middle class family. My mother always asked me to stay away from the students who belonged to any gang or the people who created nuisance to the society.

“Both, being a friend or an enemy of a nefarious is cataclysmic.” My mother used to say and warned me to stay away from all kinds of gangs and hooliganism.

Thinking about the same, I was now feeling a little tormented. This was the very first day in my college and I had to spend 3 years in the same place. In the very first day itself, I was into some kind of unwanted situation. Yet, I wanted to see Ranadeep and know about his condition.

A nurse came into the reception hall where I was sitting.

“Who among you is Neel, the patient wants to meet you.” She asked.

I rose off from the bench where I was sitting. Lots of questions were scratching my head. “Should I go and meet Ranadeep?” Thinking the same, I moved along with the nurse, with the thoughts and questions moving within my mind leaving me in a state of confusion. On one hand, I wanted to retract from all this; on the other, I was inquisitive.

In a while, I was standing in front of the ward. The nurse asked me to move into the room. When I went inside, I saw that Ranadeep was lying on the bed. His head was completely covered with bandages. It seemed that around half of his skull was bandaged. Even a single stem of hair was not visible on his head. I believe that the doctor would have removed all the hairs in order to operate him. There wasn't any cloth on his body except the shorts. Some bandages were there in small units all over his body. Beside his bed, there was a small refrigerator, a support stand, few medicines and a couple of benches. Ranadeep was lying with his eyes closed.

When I moved inside the room, he opened his eyes slightly. May be, the pacing of my footsteps in the silent room would have created a disturbance. Perhaps, he was not sleeping. When I went near him, he looked towards me. There was a stigma of pause between all of us, before the nurse shattered the indefinite silence perturbing in the room.

“Ranadeep! He is Neel. The one who saved your life.” She smiled.

Ranadeep tried to raise himself to sit on the bed. He wasn't feeling comfortable even while rising. It seemed that there was a severe pain in his back. Somehow he rose himself from the platform.

“Hello! Ranadeep! How are you? Are you feeling better?”

“Thank you, mate! It's just because of you that I am alive at the moment.” He managed to speak in shaky voice.

“It's okay, brother! I didn't do anything special; every human being would have done the same. I don't think that anyone would walk off after seeing someone in such a condition. If humanity exists in the present world, then I didn't do anything special.”

“I am indebted to you. From today onwards, you are like a brother to me. Anything you need, any problem you face, you must come directly to me without any hesitation.” Ranadeep said. I noticed he was having difficulty speaking. He drew in a long breath of air. Speaking was making him tired.

I smiled at him and nodded. I didn't want to strain him further.

“You shouldn't try speaking much. Take rest and get well soon. I will come visit you again sometime.” I said. I helped him lower himself into the bed, adjusted his pillows and pulled the sheet over his body. He closed his eyes.

I decided to go back to the hostel. I came out of the ward and found Mr. Balram still sitting on the chair outside. I was suddenly reminded of my luggage. I had left it outside the emergency room. I talked to Mr. Balram and he said he would drop me to the hostel on his scooter. I collected my backpack and suitcase and hopped on behind him.

Fifteen minutes later, I slumped on my bed.

... I Love you Rachu ...

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

I think see knows my name

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Chapter 2

My phone is buzzing on the table beside my bed. I try to open my eyes but am unable to do so. Baba is bent over his office files, his tea getting cold on the old wooden work desk. Ma keeps telling me to stay away from the rich and influential brats in my college. I tell her that I am okay and she shouldn't worry so much about me. Baba is aging over the burden of the files. His palms quiver as he scribbles on them with his blue ink pen. Ma is making my favourite laddoos for my journey. Something is pulling me out of the door. I don't want to leave. Someone is lying on a hospital bed. He is hurt badly. He smiles at me. There's blood. Ma is running towards me, calling out to me. Baba turns his head and looks on in helplessness. I am screaming but the voice does not escape my mouth. I am being pulled away. Something is constantly buzzing around me. The humming is driving me crazy. I try to break free. I am out of air. I am struggling now. Maa!! Ma....aaaa!!!

I opened my eyes with full force. Beside me, my phone was still buzzing. My forehead was drenched in sweat. I stared at the moving ceiling fan and let the dream pass out from memory. I picked up the phone.

“Hel...hello?” My voice, dry and cracked.

“Hello, Neel bhaiya? Were you sleeping?”

“Who is this?” I asked, still puzzled.

“Neel bhaiya, this is Raju. Ranadeep bhaiya asked me to drop you to college. I'll be outside your hostel in fifteen minutes, okay? You freshen up and get ready by that time.”

“But I don't need you to drop me to college. I can easily walk the distance.”

“No, no, Neel bhaiya! This is Ranadeep bhaiya's order. How can I not follow his orders? I'll be there in fifteen okay? “

The phone clicked before I could protest further. I tossed the phone on the bed and pulled myself up. My head was still heavy from last night's encounter. I dragged myself out of the bed to the washroom at the end of the corridor.

As I splashed cold water on my face, I looked up in the square, dirty mirror above the washbasin. The previous night had been nothing short of bizarre. My very first night in the university and I had already had an encounter with the police and the hospital. And now, some stranger who I managed to save from bleeding to death was sending people to drop me to the college. Ranadeep has a gang, the official had said. Did I put myself in trouble by helping him? Did I do the right thing? Of course I did. I was just helping a fellow human being. Why was I getting two thoughts about it now? I splashed some more water on my face and went inside the bathroom to shower.

As I dried myself and walked back to my room, I noticed few guys staring at me in the corridor. I could hear some whispers too. I immediately knew that the news of last night

must have spread all through the hostel. Maybe, all throughout the college as well. I hurried back towards my room.

A lanky, short heighted fellow was sitting on my bed when I entered my room. I noticed that my roommate who I didn't even have a chance to talk to properly last night had already left for college. The guy got up on seeing me and smiled. His teeth were coloured red with betel juice. He was wearing a ragged t-shirt and pajamas and looked to me like those demonstrators who follow the big politicians around.

“Do we know each other?” I asked the guy.

“Namaste, Neel bhaiya! I am Raju. Ranadeep bhaiya has sent me to pick you up. He has sent his car for you. I will drop you to college and then go visit him in the hospital.” He said and walked over to the window. He spit a mouthful of betel juice outside the window. I wondered whose head might have been the poor victim to this.

“There was no need of all this, yaar. Why burden yourself unnecessarily?” I said.

“No, no, Neel bhaiya! I was specifically told by Ranadeep bhaiya. After all, you saved his life. We all are indebted to you for this. Ranadeep bhaiya is our god. He is everything to us. We will teach those bastards a lesson soon. Those motherfuckers messed with the wrong guy. We will teach them such a lesson that even their coming generations would regret the incident. We are just waiting for Ranadeep bhaiya to get well soon and get discharged.”

Raju spoke about Ranadeep with a reverence that surprised me. I felt like he literally worshipped the man.

He came back to sit on my bed again. I dressed up quickly and we got down to where the car was parked. A black SUV stood beaming in the golden sun. I had never had a chance to sit in a four wheeler before. My father owned a second hand scooter back home and none of my friends' families could afford a car either. And the very first day of my college, I was being driven in one.

Raju put in the keys and fired the engine.

“Did the doctors say when are they going to discharge him?” I enquired of Raju.

“In a couple of days, Neel bhaiya. Ranadeep bhai is a lot better now. And, he is a strong man. He is yearning to just get out and teach those fuckers a lesson.” Raju said through gritted teeth.

“Take me with you when you go to visit him in the hospital today.” I said.

“Okay, Neel bhaiya, I'll wait for you after your classes get over.”

“And, Raju?”

“Yes, Neel bhaiya?”

“Can you come to pick me up on a bike and not this big car, please? “

Raju gave me a puzzled side glance. He smiled and nodded.

I was aware of at least a dozen faces staring down at me as Raju dropped me off at the front gate of the academic building of the university. It was intimidating and uncomfortable for me. I lowered my head and walked swiftly to the hallway inside.

Looking across the notice board I searched for my classroom and walked towards the room across the other end of the hallway.

As I entered the room, heads turned up and the whispers began. What was till now only a fear and doubt inside me was coming true. Everyone knew about last night then. Word had got around pretty fast. I had never felt more uncomfortable ever in my life before. I have always been a shy and reserved person who still had fears when talking to a group. And, here I was, my very first day in an unknown city and people already talking about me. Also, it amazed me to realize Ranadeep's reach in the university. It seemed to me like there wasn't a single person around who hadn't heard of him. Doubts on whether I had done the right thing or not started to surface and take shelter in my mind again. I tried to shake them away and walked over to take my seat at the very end of the class.

The guy sitting next to me shifted a little to his left and smiled at me. I smiled back.

“So, you are the guy who saved Ranadeep's life, haan?” He spoke through steel wired teeth.

I tried to put up an embarrassed smile.

“Umm...Yes, do you know Ranadeep?”

“Who doesn't know Ranadeep and his gang, brother? We were told and taught about him the day we entered the hostel.” He said in an excited tone, as if this was the most important story I should know of.

“Taught about him?” I asked, unable to understand the guy.

“Yes, bro. The first night in the hostel, some guys came up to the lobby and ordered all of us out of our rooms. At first, we thought they were seniors who had come to rag us. But then they made us sit in the lobby area and told us that they were part of Ranadeep's gang. They then told us all about him and his gang as well as their rival gangs.”

“What else?” I was inquisitive now.

“They told us all about Ranadeep's contacts and influences. Apparently, he comes from a family lineage of big contractors and politicians. His dad owns half the land of this town and many more in the neighbouring border areas. They said they are not going to harm us in any way. They work for the students' welfare and that we could go to them with any of our problems anytime and Ranadeep would always be ready to help us out. They also warned us against the rival parties. They said the rival gangs would never let go of a chance to make life a hell for the students as well as the common man in the town here. They misbehave with the girls around, extort money from the local vendors and beat up

the ones who defy them. Apparently, Ranadeep and his gang are the only ones who can take the rival parties one on one. It must have been the same gang who injured him yesterday.”

“So, you do know the reason for the fight yesterday? Tell me about it.” I asked in an interested tone. I wanted to know everything about Ranadeep.

The professor entered the class just as my bench-mate was about to speak.

“I’ll tell you whatever I know after the lectures. My name is Aditya, by the way. You can call me Adi.” He said, extending his right hand.

“I am Neel. Neel Gupta.”

“I know.” Adi smiled, “Actually, everyone in the college knows. You have become famous overnight.” He winked and turned as the professor began calling out the names from his attendance sheet. I felt a strange sensation run down my spine. What had I got myself into?

Classes passed quickly. The three classes that we had before a break went off smoothly. Since it was the first day, all three professors dragged on with the same introduction ritual. By the end of the third class, I was sure each one of us knew the names of every other person in the class. During the break time, Aditya and I walked over to the university library. I wanted to avoid the canteen as I didn’t want to attract any more attention towards me than what I had been receiving all through the morning. The library would hardly have any students at this time of the day and I could get to talk to Aditya properly without having to worry about people staring and whispering about me. Adi thought it was a good idea too. We greeted the grim librarian at the front desk, signed in our names and went off to sit at the journals section at the end of the library. I couldn’t help but notice the vast collection of books ranging from a myriad of topics stacked in neat rows in the racks. I was a lover of books and this was the first thing that I was pleased at since the last night. I knew I had found my safe haven in the city.

We picked up some journals from the section and sat at the table facing each other. Keeping our heads low so as not to attract the librarian’s wrath, we started talking. Actually, Adi did most of the talking and I chose to listen to him patiently.

“So, where were we?” Adi asked. The guy was visibly enjoying his role as a narrator.

“You were about to tell me the reason for yesterday’s fight between Ranadeep and the rival gang.” I answered.

“Yes! Look, no one knows the actual reason. But rumours spread around fast here. I’ll tell you whatever I have heard from the grapevine. The rival gangs are the sons of Ranadeep’s dad’s business competitors. And, they are, of course, jealous of his expanding business. Ranadeep is sort of a messiah around here. He is a brat no doubt, but he has his policies. He is good to the good and bad for the bad. The rival gang, as I had said earlier, derives pleasure by troubling the locals and residents around the town.

About a week ago, Ranadeep's dad had signed a contracting deal of some sort with a big party from outside the country. According to the deal, he would own quite a large part of the land that lies barren on the southern outskirts of the town. Now, apparently, his competitors too had eyes on that land for quite a long time. They wanted to construct malls and pubs on that land. So, when Ranadeep's dad won the contract, they were obviously not very pleased and rather quite pissed. They agreed to offer him more money in lieu of that land. But Ranadeep's dad is a very powerful and shrewd man too. He obviously sees a lot of profit for himself out of that land and therefore he refused the offer. When no amount of persuasion on their part sufficed, they threatened him. The man still did not budge from his decision. That is when those men sent their boys to beat up and harm Ranadeep. Ranadeep is his dad's only son and by harming him, the rivals hoped to weaken his dad so that he would agree to give up the land in lieu of the money. Ranadeep himself never goes out without his own gang around him. But the rivals got lucky yesterday night when Ranadeep went to take a stroll alone. They followed him till he reached the deserted back route behind the administrative building and there they attacked him. There were around half a dozen of them and they beat him with hockey sticks and bats. Ranadeep, of course, couldn't take on all of them at once. Moreover, he was unarmed.” Adi flipped a page as he completed his part of the story.

“And, that is when I happened to come along. I might have heard a few footsteps running while I was approaching Ranadeep yesterday. I bet they had planned to kill him. But they had to leave when they heard me coming in the alley. They were not expecting anyone at that abandoned place this late into the night.” I filled in my part grimly, to complete the story.

Aditya looked at me and smiled.

“You did a great job, man. You saved a man from bleeding to death. I am sure Ranadeep will include you in his gang of friends now. As it is, you are already pretty famous in the campus. Everyone has been talking about you.” He said.

“I don't want to be a part of any gang. I saved his life because that is what any human would do in my position. That doesn't mean that I'll join Ranadeep's or anyone else's gang or something. I have come here to study and that is all I plan to do. I am not getting into any dirty politics or business.” I explained to Aditya.

Aditya shrugged.

“Let's go. Break time is already over. We'll be late for the class.” He said as he got up.

We put the journals back in the section and walked off. On the way out, I smiled at the librarian and thanked him. We signed out on the register and headed back to the class.

Classes in the second half proved to be boring and mundane. My mind kept wandering away to Ranadeep's thoughts. I was still in a dilemma regarding my action. I was trying to decide and judge Ranadeep's character. Mr. Balram had spoken about him last night. He had told me about his big family lineage and influences, of the large amount of money

they possessed and about how no one knew where they earned it from. He had talked about the dangerous gang that he was the leader of. Yet, by the morning I had met two persons who thought radically different. Raju treated Ranadeep as a god and Aditya seemed to not mind his spoilt brat image as long as he was not harming innocent people. I didn't know which side of Ranadeep's character I should believe in. I was amazed at the sudden turn my life had taken in a matter of a single night.

It was the last lecture of the day and I was getting restless. The professor was busy in some random talk about his life. The class seemed disinterested. I was waiting desperately for the class to end. Raju must be waiting for me outside, I thought. Beside me, Aditya was scribbling something on his notebook. I took a glance and smiled. He had sketched a caricature of all the five professors who had taken our classes since the morning and now was busy creating the last one. Long ears, big nose and a beard. I took my pen and marked a black circle on the right cheek and filled it with black ink.

“You missed the mole.” I whispered and winked at Adi. He winked back and showed me the thumbs up sign.

The class finally ended and I got up to leave. Aditya caught up with me at the door.

“Don't you have to get your books issued? I am going to the library. You can come with me.” He said, putting his arm around my shoulder.

“I have to go visit Ranadeep in the hospital. You go on; I'll collect the books later tomorrow.” I replied.

He left me at the turn of the hallway and headed up to the library. I made my way towards the main gate. I spotted Raju at near a shop by the corner. He was smoking a cigarette. He waved on seeing me, crushed his cigarette under his floaters and came running.

“So, how was your first day of college, Neel bhaiya?” He asked joyfully.

“It was good.” I smiled at Raju. He seemed happy. Ranadeep must be recovering well.

“How is Ranadeep doing now?” I asked.

“He is a lot better, Neel bhaiya. The doctors said they need to do a couple of tests on him and then he can be discharged. Around four to five days more.” Raju replied.

We started walking to the parking area. I was beginning to grow fond of Raju. His agility and cheerfulness were infectious. And, his reverence towards Ranadeep kept on amazing me.

“So, Raju, tell me, when and how did you first meet your Ranadeep bhaiya? In college?” I asked.

“Haha, no, no, Neel bhaiya! Ranadeep bhaiya and I have grown up together.”

Seeing my puzzled expression, Raju continued.

“My father and Ranadeep bhaiya's father belonged to the same village. I call his father Baba. Baba left the village when he was a teenager and came to the city to do business. He said there was nothing to gain from the barren fields of the village. He wanted my father to accompany him too but my father stayed back. He didn't want to leave the village where he was born. So, Baba came alone. Five years later, the village was hit by drought on a massive level. People began to die of hunger. Many fled the village to other villages. The condition kept on worsening each day. My father had married and that time my mother was pregnant with me. My family was starving and there was nowhere to go. When Baba came to hear of it and the condition that my family was living in, he himself came to the village to take my family with him to the city. He brought my father and mother to his house. He had already established himself as a big contractor by that time. And, he had married too. Ranadeep bhaiya was one year old at that time. Baba said that we could stay in his house for as long as we like, but my father didn't want to be an extra burden to their family. He asked if we could stay in the outhouse of their garden. Baba was very reluctant in the beginning as my mother was pregnant and needed to be cared for. But my father insisted and made him swear on their friendship. Baba had to finally give in. My parents moved into the outhouse. Baba put my father in a small job in his business. I was born in the same outhouse six months later. And, Ranadeep bhaiya was my first playmate. Baba and his family never made us feel that we were any different. They have always cared for me equally. Ranadeep bhaiya has always treated me like his own younger brother. Baba even bore my school education fees.” There was an unflinching respect in Raju's voice. So, that is the reason Raju revered Ranadeep so much, I realized.

“So, you still live with your family?” I asked.

Raju looked at me and shook his head.

“I live alone. My mother died a few days after my birth. My father had tumour and he died a few years ago too.”

I immediately regretted asking that question. I placed my hand on Raju's shoulder. He smiled.

We reached the parking area. Raju took out the keys from his trouser pocket and walked over to the area where a host of bikes were lined up. He looked back at me and smiled. I nodded and smiled back. He had kept his word. He started his black Pulsar and we rode off to meet Ranadeep at the hospital.

The hospital building seemed a lot different than what it had seemed last night. Or maybe, last night I was too overwhelmed, tired and scared to notice it. The campus was huge and the different buildings were constructed from glass. The premises was abundant in greenery.

I tried to recall the way from last night. But I realized I hardly remembered a thing. I followed Raju into the corridor. We signed on the visitor's register. Raju said he'd wait

outside. So, I went into the ward.

Ranadeep was awake and leaning up against the pillows. He was dressed in a blue hospital gown this time. I noticed there were a lesser number of pipes running from his body than what I remember seeing last night. I smiled as I met his eyes. He shifted a little on his bed and motioned me towards himself. I went and sat on the side of his bed.

“So, are you feeling better now?” I asked.

“A lot. How was your first day in college? You didn't face any problems, did you?”

“No, no, absolutely not. And, thank you for asking Raju to drop me. But really, you didn't have to.”

“Of course, I had to. You are my brother now. It is my responsibility to see that you are taken good care of and face no problems.”

I opened my mouth to say something but Ranadeep brought his fingers to his lips. I realized it was no use and smiled meekly. I told him about my day at college, about the college and professors. He listened patiently. Sometimes, he made a funny comment here and there about certain professors.

The nurse entered ten minutes later and informed that the visiting time was over for the day. I got up from the bed.

“You take care and get well soon. I'll come over again tomorrow after classes.” I said, adjusting Ranadeep's pillow against his head.

He slid down on his bed and I pulled the sheets over him.

“Thank you, once again.” He said.

“I thought you said I was your brother now. And, I don't think a brother needs to be thanked. So...” I put my finger on my lips imitating his gesture. We both laughed. I bid him goodbye and left the room.

Chapter 3

For the next four days, Raju self appointed himself as my tour guide to the university and the city. Every day, after my classes were over, he'd take me to visit Ranadeep after which I'd ride pillion on his Pulsar and we would roam around to explore the hues and life of the city. I'd return to my room by late evening. I finally did meet my roommate. He was a lot like me - shy and not much talkative. So, we did not talk much. Raju told me that he had dropped out of college last year despite the much opposition from Ranadeep and his dad because he didn't want to live on free service. Ranadeep's family had already done a lot for him and he had decided it was time to repay their magnanimity. So, Raju had taken up the job which his father used to do. But that was not the only thing he did. Raju almost did everything around Ranadeep's dad's business and home. He was the family's right hand in all matters, business or otherwise.

On the fourth day, the hospital decided to finally discharge Ranadeep. Though at first, the doctors said that it would be better if he stayed for a couple of days more until all his medical tests were done with, but Ranadeep did not want to stay a day longer in the hospital. So, the doctors did not have much of a choice. After completing the formalities in the morning, Ranadeep was finally discharged in the evening. Raju had brought me to the hospital after the classes and both of us helped a limping Ranadeep to his car. That was the first time I met his father. Ranadeep introduced me to his dad. Mr. Ratan Thakral was a towering figure. Exactly like the big businessmen they show on television, I couldn't help thinking.

We shook hands.

“So, you are the young man who saved my only son's life. The family cannot thank you enough for giving us back our son, Neel. Now, you are part of the family. Anything you need, anything you desire shall be yours.” He spoke.

“I did what I had to, uncle. There is absolutely no need to thank me for anything. It was what any human would have done in my place. And, I desire nothing, uncle. That Ranadeep is safe and healing well is all that I want.” I smiled at him.

Mr. Thakral patted my back and smiled. I bid goodbye to Ranadeep and turned to leave.

“Hello? Wait, wait, wait!! Where do you think you are going, Mr. Neel?” Ranadeep called out.

I turned and looked at him.

“Umm... back to the hostel?” I answered meekly.

“And, who said you could do that? You are not going anywhere. You are coming with us to my house. Mom will be so happy to meet you.” said Ranadeep.

“But...” I began but was cut short before I could speak any further.

“Just get into the car. No one is going to listen to your 'ifs' and 'buts' here.” Ranadeep said as he opened the door of the car and held it for me.

I looked hesitantly at his dad. He smiled and motioned me to get in. Raju was already there at the driver's seat. He looked back and spoke to me.

“Get in, Neel bhaiya. Maa really wishes to meet you. And, all of Ranadeep bhaiya's friends will be there too. We are going to celebrate his safe return from the hospital. You must come.”

I saw that there was no use arguing. I climbed into the car and we drove off.

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Ranadeep's home was not very far. Raju stopped the car after just about a ten minute ride. As I got out of the car, I found myself inside the gates of a sprawling mansion. The name of the mansion was inscribed on the boundary at the entry. It almost looked to me like a palace. I looked up at the three storied bungalow and stood transfixed. Never in my entire life had I ever seen a house as big and grand as this nor in my wildest dreams had I thought that I would someday be inside one such. It was already late evening and the white mansion glowed like a pearl in the sea of stars in the sky overhead. Raju's voice jolted me back from my trance. A couple of servants came down running to help Ranadeep into the house.

The house was huge. The ground floor, Raju told me, was used by Ranadeep's dad as his office and for business related activities. The first floor was entirely for Ranadeep and his friends. It had five bedrooms, a hall where Ranadeep hosted and threw parties for his friends and a bar. The second floor was where the rest of the family lived. The top floor consisted of recreational facilities like a gym, a squash court, a tennis court and a temperature controlled swimming pool on the terrace. I followed Raju to the first floor. The aisle was lined up with expensive décor and on the walls to the staircase were hung huge paintings in alignment with the stairs. The door on the first floor opened onto the hall at the far end of which was the bar. On both sides of the hall were rooms. As Ranadeep entered through the door, there was big hooting and clapping from the hall. The hall was bustling with people. With Raju and me supporting him from each arm, Ranadeep walked inside. The clapping and hooting continued. Some of his friends came and hugged him. Some had tears in their eyes. We helped Ranadeep sit on the leather couch in the hall. He greeted each of his friends. Ranadeep's mother came in and hugged him as tears welled up in her eyes. Ranadeep then introduced her to me. I bent down and touched her feet. She held me up and blessed me profusely. In her eyes, I saw the pain of a concerned mother and also the happiness of seeing her son safe and well. She did not stay long saying that she would not disturb the young people in their merriment. Before leaving, she made me promise that I was coming back over here for dinner next weekend. She blessed me again and kissed Ranadeep on the forehead. After she had left, one of Ranadeep's friends opened a bottle of champagne and raised a toast to him and his good health. Everyone cheered. Within the next few minutes, the house

buzzed into a complete party mode. Music was turned on and the hall soon took the form of a dance floor. All of Ranadeep's friends took to the dance floor like it was the happiest day of their lives. Servants moved around with snacks and drinks. People kept coming over to give their personal greetings to Ranadeep. They had brought him gifts and he introduced me to each of his friends.

“Why haven't you taken anything yet?” Ranadeep suddenly noticed and asked. He motioned to one of the servants carrying the drinks.

“I have the best collection of liquor in my bar. So, what would you like to have?” he asked as the servant lowered the tray on the table.

I shook my head.

“Thank you, Ranadeep. But I don't drink.” I said and smiled.

“Are you serious? Not even once?” Ranadeep asked, clearly surprised.

“Yes...” I shook my head. “Not even once.”

“Okay, brother. I respect your choice. A little alcohol once in a while is not bad though. But I won't force you. It's completely your choice. But you can surely have the snacks, right? Or is there a problem there too? I'll get them to bring soft drinks for you.” He smiled, pushing the plate of snacks on the table towards me. He then motioned for a servant.

“Get some soft drinks for sahib.” He ordered. The servant nodded and went off.

“Thank you!” I said, picking up a fried dumpling from the plate. Ranadeep slapped my back.

“And, here comes my glass of red wine.” Ranadeep announced to himself, his smile curving into a broad grin as another servant came in with a bottle of red wine and glasses. He looked at me and rolled his eyes.

“Are you sure you are going to drink?” I asked, concerned. “You aren't totally fit yet.”

“Oh, I am totally fit and fine! And, moreover, this is red wine. It is good for health. It will help heal the wounds better.” Ranadeep replied, pouring a glassful for himself.

The party went on till late into the night. Most of Ranadeep's friends had gotten totally drunk and had to be carried back to their cars by the servants. Some of them passed out on the sofas itself. Ranadeep, who himself got drunk despite my trying to stop him several times, had to be carried into his room by Raju and me. We laid him on his bed and pulled a blanket over him. I waited for him to fall asleep. Within five minutes, he was snoring softly. We switched off the lights and came out of the room.

It was close to midnight already. There was no point going back to the hostel since it was already past the entry timings and the gates would already have closed. Raju took me to one of the other rooms on the first floor. I thanked him and wished him goodnight.

He switched off the lights. I crashed on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

It was seven in the morning when I woke up. A glass of juice was kept on the table beside my bed. I got up and went outside the room. A servant came running up to me and asked if I needed something. I asked him for the directions to the washroom and he guided me to one end of the hall. I went inside, washed my face and sprinkled some water on my hair. I came back to the room and called up Raju. He came running to me five minutes later.

“Yes, Neel bhaiya? Do you need something?” he asked.

“Can you please drop me to the hostel now, Raju? My classes start in less than an hour from now and I don't want to miss them.” I said.

“Sure, Neel bhaiya. But first, Maa asked me to bring you up to the second floor for breakfast. She said you mustn't leave without having food.” Raju said.

“I will talk to aunty now. You wait for me outside. I'll be down in five minutes, okay?” I replied.

“As you say, Neel bhaiya.” Raju answered.

“And, how is Ranadeep now? I'll go meet him in his room. Is he up yet?”

“No, Ranadeep bhaiya is still sleeping soundly. I guess he will see you in college directly.” Raju smiled.

I went up to meet Ranadeep's mother. A large breakfast was spread on the dining table at the centre. Ranadeep's mom smiled on seeing me. I wished her a good morning.

“Thank you so much for all this arrangement but I am so sorry, aunty. My classes will start in sometime and I need to rush to the hostel to freshen up and change.” I spoke to her.

“But how can you leave without having anything. Eat a little bit at least. Come, sit down.” Ranadeep's mother insisted.

“Not today, aunty. I am so sorry but I really need to rush. I promise I'll come and have a heavy meal next time.” I urged, trying to make her understand.

“Okay, but I am not letting you leave like this. I'll get some of this packed and you can take it to your hostel. And, now, no more arguments on this.” She said in a stern tone of a mother.

I gave up and smiled.

I waited in the dining hall as she arranged the food items and got the servants to pack them into paper boxes.

“Here! There you go!” she smiled, handing me a big polythene bag. Holding it, I almost suspected she had packed food not just for breakfast but for lunch and dinner as well.

“Thank you, aunty!” I said and bent down to touch her feet as I took her leave. She blessed me and reminded me of my promise for coming over to dinner next weekend. I assured her that I would remember and bid her good bye.

I climbed down the stairs and passed Mr. Thakral's ground floor office. As I moved out into the garden area, I met Mr. Thakral coming in. he was in polo t-shirt and track pants, just coming in from his morning walk, I guessed.

“So, how is my young man doing today?” he beamed on seeing me.

“Very fine, uncle. Just rushing in to college. Raju is probably waiting for me outside.” I smiled.

“He sure is, young man!! And, so is your surprise.” He said as he put an arm around my shoulder and walked me towards the gate.

“My surprise?” I asked, not quite understanding what he meant to say.

He just smiled and we walked outside the massive iron gate. I saw Raju standing there, smiling at me. Behind him, stood a gleaming black SUV. Sleek, suave and a complete beauty. At first, I looked on in puzzlement, but in the next moment, as I realized Mr. Thakral's words, my eyes bulged in disbelief.

“Accept this as a small token of gratitude from our family, son. We can never thank you enough for saving Ranadeep's life. This is but a small gesture to express our love. This is your own personal car from today.” Mr. Thakral said.

My mouth went completely dry as I tried to fathom the situation. My mind was completely blank. I could not think. I did not understand how to react to this. I took in a deep breath and tried to calm myself down. Slowly, I let the moment sink in my head. I spoke after a full five minute hiatus.

“Uncle, this is way too generous of you. I'd never have imagined this happening to me. But, as much as I am overwhelmed by your gesture, I am afraid I cannot bring myself to accept this. I am sorry, uncle but this will just be inappropriate and way too much for a guy like me.” I said.

“But, Neel, son, this is a gift... from all of us. And, Ranadeep himself wants you to have this. Please do not refuse.” Ranadeep's father spoke.

“Uncle, when I saved Ranadeep's life that day, I did it because it is the duty of a human being to save another when in need. I did not do it for any gift or for satiating any selfish purpose. My mother has taught me that some things in life cannot be measured in terms of materialistic gains. I would be insulting the values that I have imbibed from my mother if today I accept this gift of yours. Moreover, I am a simple, middle class guy coming from a very small town. I don't find happiness in luxury. That is also the reason why I asked Raju to drive me on a bike and not in a car. Thank you for going this far to think about me, uncle. I have no words to express my gratitude to you. But I cannot accept this.” I explained to him.

Ranadeep's father smiled wryly. He patted my back.

“I shall not force you, son. I am certain your mother must be very proud to have a son like you. But, any day, anytime you need something, you must not hesitate. Just tell me and I shall take care of everything.”

“Sure, uncle. Thank you so much!” I replied as I wished him good bye. Raju brought in his Pulsar and we drove off to the hostel.

Classes continued in their usual course. I called up Ranadeep during the recess and he said he was still at home and that he would join college after a couple of days.

In the evening, as I was walking back with Adi after the classes, my phone buzzed.

“Hello?” I spoke.

“Hello? Am I talking to Neel Gupta?” the voice over the phone said.

“Yes, this is Neel.” I replied, not recognizing the voice.

“Neel, this is your registrar M.N. Mathur. Could you meet me in my office now?”

“Uh..oh.. yes, good evening, sir. Yes, sir. I'll be there in your office in five minutes.” I stammered.

“Okay.” And the phone clicked.

“Who was it?” asked Adi.

“The registrar of the college. He said he wants to see me in his office right now.” I replied, still puzzled.

“Hahahaha, now what? Are they planning to award you with a gold medal or something for saving Ranadeep's life?” Adi joked.

I shrugged.

“I have no idea but I hope they are planning no such thing. I'll see you later, okay? Bye.” I said walking back towards the building which housed the registrar's office.

“Bye. Call me if you receive a gold medal.” Adi laughed, waving.

The peon took me inside the office.

“Good evening, sir! You wanted to see me? I am Neel Gupta.” I said.

“Yes, come in, come in, Neel. Have a seat.”

I thanked him and sat down on the chair opposite him.

“Neel, as you might know our college hosts its annual fest every year around this time.” The registrar continued.

“Yes, sir. I have heard about it.” I replied.

“Good. So, like every year, this year too we are going to organize the fest around in about three week's time. Since the last two years, Ranadeep has been the head coordinator for the fest and he organizes and manages everything in an excellent manner. We talked to each other at length this morning. And, for this year's fest, he has recommended your name for the head coordinator. He talked a lot about you and your abilities and potential. I conveyed the same to the other authorities and we think that you would be a really good manager. What do you think?” the registrar smiled.

My ability to think had been hitting road blocks since the morning. My day had been full of surprises. First, the gift by Ranadeep's father and now this. But this was a golden opportunity for me. To head such a big event in the very first year would be an irreplaceable achievement for me. Moreover, I would get to learn so much as well as prove my strengths to everyone. This would be my very first opportunity on such a big scale.

“Thank you so much for this opportunity, sir. I would love to work for the fest and I promise to live up to the expectations and beyond and I will make sure the event goes on to become a huge success.” I smiled and said.

“That's great, Neel. This is the zeal that we expect from a leader and you have already taken your first step. Now, you should contact Ranadeep and he will explain you all the details regarding the fest. It is a four day affair so make the most of it. All the very best!” the registrar extended his hand.

I shook his hand, thanked him again and came out of the office.

Chapter 4

Organizing the college fest proved to be one of the most entertaining and learning experiences for me. Ranadeep guided me at each and every step of the way. The experience was a complete contrast to my comfort zone as I was not a very people's person and here I was getting to interact with a lot of people. I made a lot of friends, all through Ranadeep. He saw to it that I learnt even the smallest of the tricks of the trade. It was a new me that I discovered in the three weeks.

My life was changing. In fact, I must say that I was changing. The simple and shy Neel was becoming the centre of attraction for people. The one, who always believed in following, had started leading now. But life is unpredictable, I was not aware of the fact that at the next turn of life, something is waiting for me. Something that I would not be able to forget till my whole life and may be not even after life.

It was the last day of the fest and the much awaited star night. The entire university was eager and excited about the evening. I had spent the last night at Ranadeep's home after I had crossed the hostel entry timings. Since classes were suspended on pretext of the fest, I did not have much to do. Ranadeep had already left home to foresee the arrangements and the organization for the big starry night. The star night arrangements were handled entirely by Ranadeep since it was going to be huge. I dressed up, bid goodbye to Ranadeep's mom and decided to call up Raju. Raju said he was already at the fest grounds helping Ranadeep with the last minute arrangements. He said he'd ask some staff at the house to drop me off to college but I asked him not to. I took an auto and reached the hostel. Since I had nothing else to do, I thought I might as well catch up with the studies a bit. The assessment tests were scheduled a week later. I spent the morning in the college library with Adi. In the afternoon, Ranadeep called me up to the fest grounds. He said he'd arranged the front row view for us and asked me to come over. I was not really a concert person and moreover I hated crowds. There was one more reason; Adi and I were not yet finished with our revision. I told Ranadeep that I was at the library and would join him as soon as I was done with it.

“You moron!!” this was Ranadeep, “Who spends his time in the library with books when the top singers and actors from Bollywood are about to enchant a crowd in an hour?”

“But Ranadeep, you do know I am not a crowd person. Plus the assessment tests are due in a week and I need to score. I promise to join you as soon as I finish this up. I won't be long.”

“I cannot argue with a nerd head like you. Just finish up with your damned books quick and call up Raju when you do that. He'd come to pick you up, okay?”

“No, no... Raju doesn't need to. I have Adi with me here. We would both come together. And, I'll be as quick as possible, don't worry.”

“Fine, man. But do call me up when you reach. I've a place booked for you in the front

alley. You won't be able to see anything from the back areas.”

“Sure, I will.”

And the phone clicked.

By the time Adi and I had finished with the syllabus, three hours had already passed. We packed our stuff into the bags and signed out at the desk. We walked towards the college grounds.

The ground was jam packed. Rows of bamboo barricades had been put up around the boundary. Some band was playing on the stage and the crowd was going crazy. There was smoke from the stage due to the lighting and special effects and the lighting blinded my sight. There was no way I could make my way through the maddening crowd of young college students. I dialled Ranadeep's number. Two beeps and the phone disconnected. I rang again. Five trials and I couldn't reach his phone. I tried Raju's number next. It rang. Three full rings but no one picked up. They must be unable to hear the rings in all the noise and music. I thought. Adi was standing next to me. I asked him whether he wished to go back to the hostel. He shook his head furiously.

“I am so not leaving the chance to watch the Bollywood stars. Come on, bro; let's push our way through the crowd. We just have to reach the front row, right. Ranadeep already has a place for us there.” Adi said.

I looked at him unconvincingly. I was so not in the mood to be pushed and stamped upon by the crazy crowd. But Adi was unflinching and I was left with no choice.

The crowd was cheering and hooting. Jumping and head banging with the music. The music, added with the shouts and screams of the crowd was deafening. Adi and I pushed our way through the maze of people. There was no use speaking to each other because nothing was audible in the noise which people termed as music. The speakers blared into my ears. A minute later, I turned back to check on Adi and found that I couldn't see him. I craned my neck and shouted his name. I couldn't hear my own voice in the din. I pushed my way further in. I was now in the third row of the crowd. Suddenly someone pushed me from behind and I almost fell to the ground. I looked up irritatingly and saw two girls pushing their way into the second row. I recognized one of them. She was from my class. The other girl had her back towards me. She wore a green coloured kurta and blue jeans. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and as she jumped about to catch a glimpse of the stage, her green dangles danced on her ears. At one moment, she suddenly stopped prancing about in her place. She looked behind her.

That was the first time I saw her. And, it was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. For a moment, everything around me blurred. Time seemed to have come to a standstill. There was no music, just her and the roaring silence. Her beautiful, round face was flushed red with energy. Her pink luscious lips seemed to murmur something. She brought her hands to her ears and touched them. Then she raised her eyebrows, crinkled up her nose and made a little pout with her lips. She was gesturing a sorry. It was the

cutest expression that I had ever seen. Something fluttered inside my stomach. She crinkled up her nose a little more. That moment, I wished I could just grab her and kiss her. Instead, I just smiled. Satisfied that I had forgiven her, she smiled the prettiest smile in the world and there, at that moment, I realized I had lost my heart.

I was staring at her. I wanted to look away but couldn't. I just found it impossible to get my eyes off her beautiful face. I would have kept staring at her the entire night and beyond had her friend not pulled her away. She cast a last glance at me and followed her friend deeper into the crowd. My eyes did not let go off her and followed her into the crowd. Right then, something black ran in from nowhere and stood before me, blocking my vision. I was brought back suddenly from my trance and realized the black thing was Raju. I jumped about, tried to look over his shoulder but I had already lost her. Dejected, I stopped jumping and looked at Raju. He was already giving me a look that seemed to be a mix of bewilderment and confusion. He didn't say anything though, just motioned me to follow him which I did. In a minute I was standing in the first row next to Ranadeep. When Ranadeep saw me, he shook his head and punched me on the back. I shrugged and gave him a sorry expression in reply.

The show turned out to be a grand one except for the fact that I hardly paid any attention to it. Every few minutes, I would turn back and my thirsty eyes would scan the crowd of bobbing heads in search of her. Ranadeep caught me in my act a few times and gave me an exasperated look. He couldn't fathom what was wrong with me.

That night I lay awake in my bed. Sleep evaded my eyes. I stared at the ceiling above my head and saw her image zooming in and out like the crystals in a kaleidoscope. Those black, kohl lined beautiful eyes of hers seemed to suck me inside them like a whirlpool of some sort. The way she curved up those titillating lips in a pout made me want to memorize the things she said as well as the shape of her lips when she said them. I tossed and turned on my bed, unable to get her image out of my mind. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep but her picture was constantly dancing before my eyes. The way her green kurta fit perfectly on her curves. The way she pranced about to catch a glimpse of the stage, making her earrings dance about her face. The way she had turned and blinked. The way she looked when she brought her hands to her ears and made a pout. And, the way her face lit up like a million stars in the sky and her lips curved into a gorgeous smile when she realized her apology had bore fruit. Her thoughts were tantalizing me. I ceased to be myself anymore. This feeling that I was going through at the moment was beyond what I had ever experienced before in my life. I felt like I was floating in vacuum. I no longer belonged to the mortal world anymore. I had begun weaving dreams. I began creating scenes in my mind. Scenes where I was together with my beautiful angel. Yes, I had already assumed her to be mine. We walked hand in hand through green fields and misty hills. We drenched ourselves in the monsoon and later clung together, wrapped in a single blanket drying ourselves before a bonfire in the woods. We walked together in the early morning mist along the shores of the sea. The gentle breeze played with her thick, lustrous locks and I softly pushed them from her face and tucked them

behind her ears. We sat on a solitary bench high up in the mountains, her head resting on my shoulders and we watched the sun slowly hide behind the hills, scattering crimson hues all over the sky. And, the colours of the setting sun shone on her beautiful face like a beautiful painting. And, as the evening drew to a close and darkness set in, we kissed each other to affirm our love. We kissed till the end of eternity and beyond and then we kissed a little more. And, somewhere in between all my imaginations and fantasies, I fell deep into the arms of sleep.

Someone lifted me up and threw me into a pool of water. I jumped up and woke up with a start.

“Wha..what?!!” I exhaled heavily. Water dripped from my hairs and face and onto my bed. I looked up and saw Adi standing beside my bed with a jug of water in his hand. He was grinning like he had just won the Oscars.

“What is wrong with you?!!” I asked, wiping my face with my hands.

“Nothing much. It is just that the clock on your table says it is already 9 o' clock and you have exactly ten minutes to get your ass off the bed and get ready for the second class because, well, you have already missed the first.” Adi announced as he slumped his bag on the floor and lay down on my roommate's empty bed.

I looked at the clock beside my bed.

“Oh! Holy crap!!” I jumped out of my bed and rushed to my cupboard. Grabbing my brush, toothpaste and towel, I ran out of the room in full speed. I cursed myself under my breath. Raju would have as usual come to pick me up on time had I not asked him to stop doing so a few days ago. I did not feel good to bother him every day early morning for dropping me off to college though he had absolutely no qualms about it.

Ten minutes later, Adi and I were jumping down the stairs with harried steps trying not to be late for the next class. We managed to enter the class just behind the professor. I followed Adi as he quickly grabbed the first bench that he saw vacant. In a hurry to take my seat, I accidentally dropped my bag on the floor and out tumbled my books.

“Shit!! Shit!!” I hissed as the professor stared at me sternly from behind his thick rimmed glasses. I gave him an embarrassed look and bent down on the floor to gather my belongings. Our seat was in the second row, so at my present position, with my back to the professor, I was facing almost the entire class. I looked up from the floor once to see whether I was being stared at by the class. And, then suddenly my heart stopped beating. She was there right before me, on the third last bench. In a red and black salwar, she looked more beautiful than the previous night. She had worn her hair open and they fell on her back. A single strand fluttered around her face and she gently tucked it behind her ears. She had worn slightly smaller danglers on her ears today. Her eyes, black with kohl looked bewitching.

She suddenly shifted her eyes towards me. Her eyebrows furrowed and then rose as she

recognized me from last night. She smiled. My heart skipped a beat. I tried to smile back but I think I just managed to embarrass myself further. She turned towards the board again. I hurriedly picked up my books and crouched onto my seat next to Adi. The professor was scribbling something on the board but I had no idea what. I could hardly concentrate. Every two minutes I had this urge to turn around and look at her. It was Adi who broke into my reverie.

“What on earth were you doing down there?” Adi whispered, his face still staring straight at the board.

“Uh...what?” I whispered back, cursing Adi under my breath, for dragging me out of my dream world.

Adi hunched his eyebrows at me.

“You were squatting about on the floor for a good whole five minutes. What the hell were you doing there?” He asked, still whispering.

“Nothing.” I tried dodging his question.

He gave me a long, hard look, then shrugged and turned back towards the board.

During the break, Adi and I sat in the canteen. I was still lost in my thoughts when she entered in with her friend. They came up to the counter and ordered a soft drink each.

“Who is that girl over there?” I asked Adi, motioning towards the counter.

Adi turned back to look.

“Why, that is Pooja, of course. I thought you knew her.”

“I know Pooja, you idiot. I meant the girl standing with her. The one in the red salwar. Who is she? Saw her for the first time in class today.”

“Oh, that one? Yeah, she is a lateral entry. There have been two lateral entries in our class today. Wait, what did she say her name was? Ummm.. Aditi, yes!”

“She told you her name?” I asked, eyes widening.

“No bro, she told the entire class during her introduction in the first period.” Adi shook her head.

“Aditi”, I mused. A name as beautiful as her looks.

“Dude!! You should see the second girl. Her name is Ria. Man, she is hot!! You missed her entry sequence in the first period. What style!! What attitude!! What class!! Wow!!” Adi continued.

“Hmm”, I answered, seemingly disinterested. My heart was already taken by the simple and beautiful Aditi. Aditi!! I kept on repeating her name in my head.

We had a half day. After the recess, Adi and I decided to go to the library. By now, we

had become sort of regulars to the library. The librarian even used to greet the both of us with his rare smile. He said Adi and I were among the thin breed of students who actually visited the library, on a regular basis even.

We signed in our names and walked in to our usual place at the end of the library. I had a lot of incomplete work to finish up for today. Having missed the first class and having been mentally absent in the second, I now completely relied on Adi's notes. I asked Adi to take out his notes while I went in to the reference books section to look for a foreign author.

As I shuffled through the books on the rack, I heard a soft humming sound emanating from the opposite shelf. Someone was humming a Hindi film tune. The voice caught my attention. It was inexplicably melodious and sweet. I moved forward in the direction pulled by the voice. I pushed aside a few books and looked through the shelf to the opposite side. Aditi was leafing through a book, her lips curved up in a gentle smile and her sweet voice plucking the strings of my heart.

I stood there like a statue, unable to move or react. Aditi, blissfully oblivious to my presence, carried on with her song. I wanted to just stand there all my life, gazing at her beautiful face and listening to her sweet voice.

Adi slapped me at the back.

“What the heck are you doing here? I have been waiting over there since the last ten minutes.”

The humming suddenly stopped. Aditi looked up, suddenly taken aback on the realization that there were other people in the library. Adi looked up at her in surprise too. He hadn't noticed her there before either. What ensued was a confusing and awkward situation. Neither of us spoke anything for a whole minute. Then finally, Aditi broke the awkward silence.

“I am so sorry. I didn't know there was someone else in the library too. I would not be humming otherwise. Sorry!” She spoke in a soft tone. She looked really apologetic. And, cute as hell.

I was tongue tied. A million things to say were zooming in and out of my mind but I could not get my mouth to open. Next to me, Adi was still trying to fathom the confusing situation.

“It is alright.” I finally managed to utter, “We just came. You couldn't possibly have seen us from behind there.”

I kicked Adi slightly on his foot.

“Uhh..yeah..yeah, we just came.” He somehow took the cue and added on.

She smiled and began to walk away.

“Umm, wait!!” I called back, and then realized that I did not have a reason to. I

panicked.

“Yes?” she said, turning back.

“Umm... you are new to the class, aren't you? You have missed quite a many classes and the assessment tests are due in fifteen days. Umm... do feel free to ask anything regarding the syllabus and the subjects. I would be glad to be of any help.” I blurted out, surprised at my own brevity. In my mind, I was patting my own back.

Aditi's face lit up. She gave me a broad smile.

“Thank you! I have so many syllabuses to catch up with and I am not familiar with anyone around here. You know Pooja? She is my roommate. She did give me her notes but most of them are not complete. She hasn't attended too many classes herself. It would be really generous of you if you could help me a little.”

I was already beginning to thank my stars. “Yes, I am a champion.” I was proud of myself.

“Sure, would love to.” I smiled, “So, tomorrow after classes? Here itself?”

“Okay!” she said.

“Great! And, oh, I am Neel, by the way.. Neel Gupta. And, this here is my friend, Aditya.”

She smiled at Adi and muttered a hello. Adi nodded and smiled wryly in reply.

“I should better be going now. See you tomorrow. Bye!” she said.

“Bye, Aditi. And by the way, you have a very beautiful voice.” I took another random leap of daring.

She smiled and looked to the floor shyly. She then gathered her bag and walked off.

Adi gave me a low teasing whistle as we walked back to our seat. I looked at him and raised my eyebrows.

“What?” I asked, pretending to act calm and nonchalant.

“You tell me what? What's brewing?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. Now, let us not waste any more time. I have notes to make for myself.” I replied, feigning sternness.

“For yourself or for someone else?” Adi was visibly enjoying himself.

“Shut up and let's study.” I said, thumping the book on the table.

Adi gave his whistle again and opened his notes.

P

“Hi, I am so sorry for being late on the very first day itself.” I looked up from my notes.

Aditi was standing before me. Our classes had got over half an hour ago and I had been waiting for her in the library. I stared at her. Clad in an orange kurta and churidaar, her hair pinned to one side of her shoulders, she looked surreal.

“No, uh... it's okay. I myself came here just a few minutes ago.” I lied.

She pulled a chair and sat down opposite me.

It was going to be difficult concentrating on the notes, I realized. I tried not to look at her because then I wouldn't be able to look away.

“We'll start with the very first chapter, okay?” I said, looking down at the book.

“Hmm.” She said.

Aditi was quick at grasping things, I noticed. Within the next hour, she had finished with the first chapter. I was impressed.

I walked her to her hostel that evening. And, for the subsequent evenings too.

P

Weekends were the time that I had come to always spend with Ranadeep and his family at their house. It had started as a casual dinner invite by Ranadeep's mother one Saturday night and with time it had become a ritual. And, though initially, I had expressed my apprehensions about it, I had begun to enjoy myself eventually. Ranadeep's family was everything that Raju had told me about in the beginning and much beyond that. With his family, I felt I was in a home away from home. I had told my mother all about Ranadeep and his family and how his mother treated me like her own son and fed me with the most delicious food. I had also told mother everything about his influential family. Initially, she did use to tell me not to mingle too much with “these rich people” but with time she stopped. And, I had assured her that I was not getting into smoking or drinking with Ranadeep, so she had ceased to question me eventually. As for my weekends, this was the time when I got to know about everything happening in the college and the town from Ranadeep. Along with his gang, he had finally caught hold of the leader of the rival gang and had beaten him black and blue. Ranadeep's father had further had filed a false case against the party. News about new contracts and new fights had ceased to be uncommon to me now. But the good thing was, Ranadeep never told me to join his gang or alike, unlike what Aditya had prophesied once. He knew well that I was not that kind of a guy and that I had a family I was answerable to back home. He protected me like an elder brother, yet never forced me into doing something I did not like. That was the thing I respected the most in him.

The weekend preceding the assessment test, I was there with the whole family, bonding over Mrs. Thakral's amazing food as usual. Talks were in about a fashion show that Ranadeep was planning to host on the occasion of the university's foundation day next week. He was really very excited about the whole thing.

“I am going to make it the biggest fashion show this town has ever seen!!” Ranadeep

announced jubilantly.

“We are sure you will, Ranadeep.” I said, “after all, you are the organizer. The show has to definitely turn out to be a super hit. Have you fixed up the judges already?”

“Yes, I have. We have invited the heads of the country's top three modelling agencies to be the judges. In fact, they will land here tomorrow evening since the show is on Tuesday. Neel, why don't you come with me to receive them from the airport tomorrow evening? It would be fun.”

I wanted to accompany Ranadeep but I had already promised Aditi to help her out with the test preparation tomorrow. I had not told Ranadeep about her yet or how I felt about her.

“Umm... I would have loved to, Ranadeep, but I have a combined study planned with a classmate tomorrow. I had told you about the assessment test on Monday, hadn't I?” I said.

“Oh, you can bring along your girlfriend too, if you like!” Ranadeep said casually, not looking at me.

I choked on the food. As I coughed and grabbed the glass of water, Ranadeep started to laugh uncontrollably. He slapped my back a few times.

“Careful, careful, Mr. Neel Gupta!!” he winked.

“So when were you going to tell me about her, you moron? After you had had a couple of kids?” he continued.

I took another sip of water.

“Aditi isn't my girlfriend, yaar Ranadeep.” I answered.

“Oh, she'll soon be, I know. Your friend, Aditya, has told me all about the love story that has been brewing in the library every day. And, you dumbass, you haven't even cared to tell me about it.”

I had been not been meaning to keep anything from Ranadeep. But Aditi and I were just beginning to know each other. I was not even sure if she considered me as a friend yet. So, there was nothing much of a story to tell. But as we finished our dinner that night and sat in the balcony of his house under the cool, black, starlit sky, I told Ranadeep everything about her. About that evening on the last day of the fest, about her flawless beauty that enraptured me right at the first sight, about her sweet voice and her even sweeter nature. About the little things in her manners that attract me like a magnet. About our evolving friendship and about my inexplicable love for her. Ranadeep was smiling by the time I had finished.

“So, when are you planning to propose her?” he asked.

“I haven't even thought about it. Our friendship has just begun. I don't want to do

something right now that will spoil it.” I said, looking into the vastness of the sky over my head, her image playing before my eyes.

“When is her birthday?” Ranadeep enquired.

“16th of next month, why?” I asked, puzzled.

“Good, so you have enough time before that. You are going to propose her before her birthday. The prelude to that is up to you to script, my man!!” Ranadeep looked at me excitedly.

... I Love you Rachu ...

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

I think see knows my name

Book Downloaded from: EBOOK4IN.BLOGSPOT.COM

Chapter 5

I had been busy running around with Ranadeep all throughout the morning. Working on the fest had given me a lot of experience already and I was enjoying myself. I wanted Aditi to come along too but she had refused. She was not very fond of management and preferred being an audience. Ranadeep and I looked around all the last minute arrangements. He insisted on not leaving even a minute detail untouched. We checked the seating arrangements for the audience. Ranadeep had made an elaborate arrangement. On the three sides of the ramp was the place where the final participants would be seated. It had a side entry to the green room backstage so that the participants would find it quick and easy to get ready and take the stage. Also, this would prevent overcrowding at the backstage. The backstage was only to be used by the technicians and Ranadeep's organizing committee. The participants' seating area had been barricaded with steel chains supported on iron sticks to prevent the audience from entering too close. Behind the barricade, on all sides was the audience arena. Rows of chairs were arranged in a semi circular arrangement to aid the audience's view of the ramp. The ramp was constructed on a raised pedestal so that the show could be viewed even by the people sitting at the end in the audience. At the front end of the ramp was the jury's seat. It was in the same pedestal as the ramp. Three chairs and a long table were placed. A set of three wooden steps were placed behind the seats that led to the audience level.

By afternoon, we had finished checking and rechecking all the arrangements. Ranadeep went in to see the judges at their hotel while I went off to meet Aditi.

The stage was bathed in the numerous red, green and blue lights. The ramp looked scintillating. Ranadeep had organized the whole thing better than he had promised. The publicity of the show had been tremendous and students from the different colleges from all over the state had come down to participate. The presence of an elite jury had taken the popularity of the show to a greater scale. Huge arrangements were made on and off stage for the event.

The show started towards late evening. There were a baffling number of people in the audience. Ranadeep had as always, reserved seats in the front row for his special friends. I took Aditi to our seats. Adi joined us a while later. Ranadeep came and sat beside me. I introduced him to Aditi. He shook her hand politely.

“Neel keeps talking about you all the time, you know. I am glad I finally got to meet you.” Ranadeep said. I gave him a stern stare and he winked playfully in reply.

Aditi smiled shyly.

“I have heard a lot about you from him too. He keeps talking about you all the time too.” she said.

“Oh, he does, does he? I hope he has created a positive impression of mine, then.” said Ranadeep.

“More than that.” Aditi looked at me and smiled. “He considers you as his elder brother. He tells me a lot about how you and your family treat him like a son and how special you all are to him.”

“Oh, your friend here has a bad habit of being overtly modest. He must have blabbered a lot about me and nothing about what he has done for me.” Ranadeep chipped.

“Yes, he told me about the unfortunate incident and that he had brought you to the hospital.” Aditi said.

“He didn't just bring me to the hospital, Aditi. He saved me from the jaws of death. He stayed back in the hospital the entire night. He came to visit me every day after his classes. He gave back my family the life of their only son. What he has done for me and my family will always be more than what we can ever do for him.”

Aditi smiled in reply.

Ranadeep continued. “Your friend right here, ma'am, is a gem of a person. A little shy in certain matters but a great person to be with. Never lose him.”

I was suddenly aware of what Ranadeep was up to. He was trying to do for me what I had been unable to all these days. He was trying to find out Aditi's feelings for me. I immediately panicked as I realized Ranadeep's plans. What if Aditi thought I had asked Ranadeep to do this? What if she thought some other way? What if I was nothing more than a good friend to her? The questions barged through my mind. I looked at Ranadeep helplessly. Widening my eyes, I motioned him to stop. But he was clearly enjoying himself thoroughly while I slumped down deeper into the chair with each moment of embarrassment that he was putting me into.

Finally, the guy hosting the show took to the stage and Ranadeep and Aditi's conversation was paused. I gave a big sigh of relief. The guy was a famous VJ on a national music channel and a friend of Ranadeep. He just had to make one call and the VJ had agreed to host the show. Ranadeep fell back on his seat, smiling to himself. A moment later, my cell beeped with my SMS tone.

She clearly likes you!! It was written all over her face when I was talking to her about you. Today is your chance. Stop being an idiot and propose to her. Good luck!!

I looked at Ranadeep as I read his text message. He nodded at me and smiled. In front of us, VJ Hrehaan was introducing the judges. The crowd was cheering and hooting. I looked at Aditi sitting beside me. She looked as beautiful and pristine as ever. I read Ranadeep's message again and then I finally made up my mind.

Over a hundred participants had come from all over the various towns and colleges. It was going to be a long night of glamour and glitz. The participants had been divided into batches of twenty. In between each batch's ramp walk, the audience was kept to groove by dance and song performances by students of our college. As for me, I had never seen a fashion show before. I watched on impressed as girls in fabulous creations sashayed

down the ramp in style. The girls in the crowd cheered with greater enthusiasm every time a male contestant walked down the ramp.

Half an hour into the show, Aditi tucked at my arm.

“Neel, can we move out of here for some time, please? I am feeling a little unwell. My head is aching with all the lights and noise.” She asked, her hands pressing against her temples.

I looked at her, concerned.

“What happened? Come on, let's go out.” I said, holding her hand.

I motioned to Ranadeep that I'd be back in a while. He smiled and nodded.

We came out of the ground and walked towards the hostel area.

“Are you all right? What happened?” I asked her again.

“The lights and the loud music were doing something to my head.” She said.

“Do you want to sit somewhere?” I asked, motioning towards the lawn on the side of the road.

“No, no, I am feeling much better now. Can we just walk? I had been sitting for too long.”

“All right” I smiled at her.

The night was refreshingly cool and silent on this side, away from the blaring music and the heated glitz of the show back at the grounds. We walked along the road in silence. But it was a comfortable silence, not the awkward one that generally ensues between strangers. We were no longer strangers, I realized. Friends finally, maybe. Or more than that, perhaps. I did not know. But I knew that I wanted to.

This is your chance. I recalled Ranadeep's text. This is my chance. I said to myself. I looked at Aditi walking beside me. She had left her hair open and strands of it bobbed against her face in the cool breeze that blew. A little nose ring sat demurely on her nose. A new addition, I noticed. I imagined her crinkling up her nose in her quintessential manner, the silver nose ring only making her all the more adorable.

Will she be ready? Was I myself ready for this? What if she gets upset and refuses to be friends with me anymore? What if she stops talking to me all together? Was I ready to take the risk? Lots of questions were hovering in my mind, making me feel more and more nervous.

“She clearly likes you. It was written all over her face.” Ranadeep's text came back to my rescue and I took the decision. I stopped in my steps. Aditi walked along. I watched her as she continued walking. A moment later, she noticed my absence beside her and stopped. She looked back, puzzled.

“What happened?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

I was looking at her.

Say it. Say it, Neel! Someone was speaking to me. Aditi was standing there, looking at me quizzically.

“Nothing, I just stopped to tie my shoelaces.” I shook my head.

IDIOT!! The voice said.

“Okay, let's go.” Aditi smiled and turned away.

“Aditi!!” I called out.

She turned. I jogged up to her.

“Umm... I have something to tell you.” I said.

“Yes?” she asked.

I looked around us. The road was empty. The yellow street light filtered through the trees and lighted up the road in a netted pattern. We had left the bustle and excited chaos of the grounds far behind us. The breeze whistled into the calm night. I took a step closer to her. Her eyes fluttered.

“Aditi!” I said, looking straight into her deep, dark beautiful eyes. She kept quiet.

“Aditi, I first saw you in the concert on the last day of the fest. Truth be spoken, I could not take my eyes off you that day. You looked so beautiful, so serene and calm. And, when you smiled at me and turned away, I realized you had taken my heart with you too. I have never felt the same with anyone the way I feel for you. And, my feelings for you have only become deeper over the days that we have spent together. I realized your heart is as beautiful as you are. I have been unable to stop thinking about you and I just had to say this today because I don't want to lose you. I want you to be mine forever. Aditi, I... I LOVE YOU.” I stammered. I was literally shivering by the time I was pouring my heart out.

I was still looking at her when I finished. She was still quiet. A million thoughts were rocketing past my head. There! I ruined our friendship. Now, she's never going to talk to me again. I am never going to be able to meet her again or spend time with her. Why isn't she saying anything? She must be thinking I betrayed her friendship. Oh god! What did I do?

She remained silent for a minute and that one minute seemed like an eternity to me. Neither her eyes nor her lips were conveying me anything going on inside her heart. I was getting restless with every passing second.

“And, I thought you are never going to say it!” I heard her speak. She was smiling.

“Wha...what?!” I scratched my head, still unable to process her reply.

“I love you too, Neel.” She replied, in a bit louder tone this time.

“Really?” I said, my eyes widening in surprise. I wanted to jump around and hug her and kiss her all at once at that moment.

“Hmm.” she said. “Initially, I thought you liked me but when you did not say anything even after so many days we spent together, I thought I might be wrong and that you just consider me a friend.”

“Oh, I am an idiot. I really am. But I love you. I love you so much!” I said and I just pulled her close and hugged her. She gave a clear, ringing laugh.

We stayed in each other's embrace for a long time, listening to the other's heartbeat. I stroked her hair with my fingers. I was feeling happy, relieved. There is no feeling in the world that can match up to the one you experience when your love is cuddled in your arms. I wanted to keep her there always, safe in my arms. I felt protective about her. I felt responsible towards her happiness.

..Thak-Thak-Thak-Thak-Thak.....

An irritating sound stopped Neel all of a sudden. There was a sudden cessation for a second. The wave of air which was going on, full of love and romance had whirled. A sudden excitement of the two beautiful love birds had been tormented. The very next second, it was a harsh voice and a rude face...

“Mr. Rajiv, you will have to leave now, visiting time is over.”

He opened the jail gates,

It was the jailer speaking in oblivion.

“Sir, Can you please allow me to stay for some more time. I am amidst one of the most crucial interviews of my life,”

“No way, we are bound by law. We can't go against it.”

So, that was the official end of the day with Neel, a real life story that had created enthusiasm within me and left me with a big question in my mind. Everything was so good, Neel's life was at the right pace, then why is he here, in jail, in a life which is equivalent to death, a life where pain and suffering are a part and parcel, a life which is full of darkness with little hope for light?

With a heavy sigh and a number of questions trying to bulge out of my heart, I left the jail.

Back home, my beautiful wife was waiting for me with the food lying on the dinner table. She was not just my wife; in fact she was my life. I love her very much. And today, the love for her had increased further.

During the dinner time, I could not eat properly. I knew that today, none of the food stuffs can suffice my hunger. I was hungry, to know the other side of Neel's story. I realized that the investigation I had done before coming to Neel was so incomplete.

After this I lay on my bed. Within minutes, my wife slept. I loved to see her sleeping. I kept on looking at her throughout the night and thanked God for making my love- my life, my wife.

Chapter 6

Next Day

In the morning I got ready by 8. It was a Sunday, the only day when my wife can sleep for long, and with comfort. And, the only date, which was going to answer the most trivial question which had jammed my heart. I didn't want her to be disturbed. So, I left a note for her which said:

“Love! I thank God that you are my life forever, till the last breath. I thank God that I see you sleep every night. I thank God that he chose me to hold your hands, in every walk of life. Love you always. Going to know the other part of another true love story, which is unlike ours. A love story which is emulsified by pain. Love you forever!”

Within half an hour, I was in front of the Central Jail. I requested the jailor for a long schedule with Neel. He opened the gates. Neel was sitting on the edge of a wall. Perhaps, he was also waiting for me.

“Hello, Neel! How are you?”

“Just the same, like every other day. Dragged in darkness and hedged with pain.”
How are you?”

“Lost in your life, Neel. I could not sleep the last night. I wanted to know the other part of your life. I wanted to know why your moment embrace can't didn't lasted long. What dragged you here and what let you a life like this?”

“So, where were we?” Neel asked.

“The moment you proposed her she accepted your love” I reminded him.

“Ohh... Yes!” He said and continued from where he ended the other day.

“Neel?” she whispered.

“Hmm.”

“I think we should go back now. Ranadeep must be waiting for you.”

“You sure? Is your headache better?” I asked.

“It's vanished in all the happiness that you have given me now.” She smiled her electric smile.

I pulled at her nose adoringly and she crinkled it. I loved her.

We walked over to our seats, our hands clasped in each other's. Ranadeep and Adi saw us and gave a low whistle almost simultaneously. Adi punched my arm and Ranadeep

slapped my back.

“And, we almost thought you two had taken off for the night.” Ranadeep winked at me.

I smiled at him.

“How far has the show taken?” I asked him.

“The last batch will be walking the ramp now. And, then the judges will select the finalists.” Ranadeep explained.

“Hey, Neel, I heard Ria is participating too. Haven't seen her yet? Maybe, she's with the last batch.” Adi said excitedly.

“Yeah, good luck to you.” I laughed at Adi's excitement.

“Ria, who?” Ranadeep asked.

“Oh, she is a classmate of ours. A lateral entry with Aditi. Adi is totally in love with her.” I joked about Adi.

“Man... she is so hot!!” Adi was finding it hard to control his enthusiasm now.

“Really? Then I must see her.” Ranadeep winked at Adi.

“I found about a little about her. She has just moved in from the States. Her family stays there. She is the only daughter of her parents and they are filthy rich. No doubt, she walks with that air of attitude about her.” Adi said.

VJ Hrehaan announced the entry of the last batch of participants and the music was turned on. Boys and girls walked down the ramp, their movement in rhythm with the music. The audience cheered and encouraged them. Adi looked on in anticipation. He had almost risen from his seat. Finally, Hrehaan announced the last participant.

“And, now ladies and gentlemen, we have our final participant, the last but not the least. Please put your hands together for Ria Chopra.”

I had seen Ria during classes before but I realized I hadn't given her much of a notice. Now, as she cat walked towards the stage, I realized the seriousness in Adi's compliments. She walked in from the left of the stage. Ria Chopra was a bolt of lightning. She was ravishing. She wore a flaming red off shoulder top and a black mini skirt. She walked in a pair of bold red high heeled shoes. As she glided down the ramp, her perfect figure swayed sensuously with the music. She walked to the middle of the ramp and stopped. Her smoky brown eyes pierced through the audience as she stood there with her hips tilted towards her side and her hands on her bare waist. A silver ring pierced her navel making her look sexier. She had painted her lips in bold red. For a moment, a hush passed over the entire audience. It soaked in the sensuality that Ria Chopra was radiating. The music took a different beat and a cloud of smoke was released onto the stage by the lighting guys backstage. And with almost perfect timing, Ria tilted her body a bit and jerked her head, her hair flying to the other side. She then

ran her fingers through her hair, bringing all her locks to one side and turned back in style, revealing a black serpent tattooed right in the middle of her bare back. The audience went crazy. The screaming and hooting tore through the decibel levels. People were whistling and shouting at the top of their lungs. I looked at Adi sitting beside Aditi. He was lying there slumped on his seat, his jaws dropped to the floor and his eyes were about to spring out of their sockets. Aditi herself had her eyebrows raised. I turned to the Ranadeep's side. Ranadeep had leaned to the front, his hands clasped together. Unlike the rest, his eyes were narrowed. He was looking intently at Ria. Ria was killing the ramp. Screams of "Ria, Ria" reverberated through the air as she walked back towards the green room.

"Damn!" I heard Ranadeep exclaim to himself.

The results of the participants who had qualified for the finals were announced after ten minutes. Unquestionably, Ria's name was at the top of the list. The participants were given twenty minutes time to prepare for the final. Apart from the ramp walk, each of the ten finalists had to perform something of their choice for a minute.

Ranadeep was sitting on his chair, biting his nails. He was pondering over something.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"I want that girl." He said.

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Ria Chopra. I have fallen in love with her, Neel. And I want her." Ranadeep said.

"What?" My mouth remained open for few seconds. "So, what are you going to do?" I asked.

"I am going to propose her tonight itself." He replied intently.

"But she doesn't even know you probably, Ranadeep. Wouldn't it be better if you try to befriend her first?" I asked, taken aback by his sudden decision.

"I cannot wait that long. I got to do something. I just want her at any cost. Damn, she took my breath away." Ranadeep had already made up his mind. I wanted to say him that what he was thinking to do is a complete idiocy but remained mum, keeping his adamant behaviour in mind.

"I am going to host a post-event party. It would be an informal one. I am going to call up Raju and ask him to see everything. It won't take long. We can arrange drinks for everyone, yes, that will do. We can do it here itself after the show. And, then I am going to propose her there, in front of all the people." Ranadeep spoke excitedly.

I couldn't believe him. Ranadeep had lost his mind completely. He was acting in haste and something told me things were going to get messed up. I tried to reason with him politely. But Ranadeep had made up his mind and he wouldn't listen to anyone. He called up Raju and explained him to take care of the arrangements. VJ Hrehaan announced the

beginning of the final show.

If at all Ranadeep had had even a little apprehension about his plan till now, it all vanished after Ria's final performance. Ria Chopra spewed fire on the stage. She wore a peach coloured low cut sleeveless gown that accentuated her curvaceous figure to the brim. Her hair had been tied in a high bun with soft curls falling on her face. The audience watched enraptured by the sensuality she executed as she swayed down the ramp. And, then her final performance! The music was changed to a sensualistic English number. Ria broke all the shackles and inhibitions as she grooved her body passionately to the music in the background. She ran her hands down her body, she pouted, she bent and she jerked. The audience was sent into ripples of ecstasy as Ria moved about the stage. She finally ended her dance and threw a flying kiss at the audience. The crowd went mad with craze. Boys hooted and whistled and screamed her name. Beside me, Ranadeep looked on.

“I want her, Neel.” He spoke to me, his eyes still fixated at her. I felt a strange sense of seriousness in his voice and it made me uncomfortable.

The show was finally coming to an end. VJ Hrehaan entertained the crowd a bit more while the judges discussed the final results within themselves. But everyone was already aware of the results. Ria was unparalleled. No other participant had even come close to her sensational performance. The crowd was sent into a wave of frenzied excitement.

The judges finally took to the stage. Each of the three jury members spoke to the audience about the beautiful execution of the show. They made a special mention to Ranadeep and his team and thanked them for the hospitality. They spoke about the magnitude and the grandeur of the event and how the show had surpassed their expectations.

The final moment of the results ticked in. The names of the first and second runners up were announced. The crowd continued to cheer and shout. They came and collected their prizes, happiness trickling from their faces.

“And, now, for the winner of the night. That one name that each one of us here is dying to hear. Before I ask the judges to announce the name, can I hear some guesses, ladies and gentlemen?” VJ Hrehaan shouted into the mike.

Unanimous chants of “Ria! Ria!” ran through the crowd, rippling the air.

“All right people!! We are going to announce the name of the winner soon but before that there is yet another great news for you all. The show, though is closing towards the end, but the night is far from over, ladies and gentlemen! The party has just begun! So, we are having a post event cocktail party right here on the grounds in an hour and each one of you is welcome!! Come on!! Let the party begin!!” VJ Hrehaan announced. The crowd cheered on.

“And, now, over to the judges for the most awaited result!” He continued.

The judge at the centre was handed over the microphone.

“I think there is absolutely no doubt on who the winner is. So, without wasting much of your time, I'll just announce the name.” The judge smiled and spoke.

Ria's name once again rang through the audience.

“Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you guessed it absolutely correct. The winner of tonight's event is Miss Ria Chopra!!” The jury member announced.

A series of screams and hoots ran through the audience arena. Ria walked in from the side of the stage, still suave, still stylish, still brimming with an unparalleled attitude on her face. She bent down as the judge placed a sparkling tiara on her head and handed her a bouquet of flowers. She then turned towards the crowd, waved her hand demurely and blew kisses to the crowd. Ranadeep was smiling beside me.

“She is mine.” He spoke, more to himself than to me.

P

The ground was gradually cleared. The backstage guys began taking down the lights and flexes. Raju came in to get the arrangements ready for the cocktail party. Most of the people had gone back, tired and exhausted by all the screaming they had done. Still, a considerable amount stayed back for the post event party. They loitered on the grounds. Ria's name was on everyone's lips. She was phenomenal.

“Don't you think you should go and congratulate Ria personally first, Ranadeep?” I asked. “This way you could get a bit familiar with her first before taking such a bold step of downright proposing her in front of the entire public.”

“I want to surprise her.” Ranadeep winked. “And, it's not like she doesn't know me. I organized the whole event. She must have heard my name, of course she knows me. Everyone knows me.” Ranadeep was getting complacent and overconfident all of a sudden. This was unlike what I had ever seen him behave.

“Damn, Neel, she just blew me away, brother! Did you look at that attitude on her face? That confidence on her face! Oh, man, sexy!! And, the way she walked and moved her body! Damn, damn, damn!! I have never been this attracted to any girl before, Neel, my brother!” He continued.

I smiled at him wryly. This was really unlike anything I had ever seen of Ranadeep. He was not acting with his mind, the thing that Ranadeep had always been known to. My intuitions kept on making me more apprehensive about his decision.

Aditi had stayed back to be with me too. I told her about Ranadeep's plan.

“What? Is he serious?” she asked, eyes widening in shock.

“More serious than I have ever seen him.” I replied, dejectedly.

“Oh, God! What do you think is going to happen, Neel?” she said, worried.

“Don't know. I just hope that everything goes as per Ranadeep's plan.” I said, trying to silence my intuitions that feared something else.

The arrangements were almost done with. Mini bars were set up on both sides of the ground and a mild lighting rented the place a soft glowy feel. A small pedestal was placed at the front and it was covered with white cloth to give it a look of a small stage. Soft, slow music played from behind the stage. People gradually began trickling in. Everyone was only talking about the fashion show, about how well everything was managed by Ranadeep and of course about Ria Chopra. All eyes were waiting to see her arrive again. Aditi and I wandered around, hand in hand.

Gradually some of the participants started arriving. The crowd started to thicken. Ria hadn't shown up yet.

She was the last to arrive. Followed in tow with two of her friends, she entered like a queen. She wore a black halter neck cocktail dress that hugged her body and she carried with her an air of attitude that made men go nuts. The crowd clapped as she entered and she smiled and waved in acknowledgement. It all seemed a little superfluous to me.

“What's with that attitude of hers?” I asked Aditi.

“Rich daughter of a rich father, attractive and now the fame. Attitude has to come in.” Aditi smiled and shook her head.

“So? Ranadeep is rich too. Has he ever shown that attitude? And, I've told you about his family, right? And, you are so beautiful yet not an iota of attitude and that's why I love you. It's sad how Ranadeep is only attracted towards her looks.”

“Neel, don't make a judgment about her. Maybe, she isn't the way she looks. Maybe, she is nice to talk to and friendly. We haven't ever talked to her, have we? So, it's wrong to judge her that way, isn't it?” Aditi said, looking at me.

“Hmm, maybe you are right. I shouldn't be judging her like that. Sorry!” I smiled at my girl.

“I love you.” She whispered and leaned on my arms.

People were going up to Ria and congratulating her. She was visibly enjoying all the attention that was being bestowed upon her. Strangely enough, Adi hadn't shown up. After I had told him that Ranadeep had fallen for Ria and he was planning to propose her after the event, he had given me a crestfallen look. Later, he said that he was tired and was retiring back to his room.

The party continued and people were enjoying themselves. I wondered where Ranadeep was. I couldn't see him around.

Just then the mike screeched and Ranadeep's voice boomed.

“Hello, everyone!”

Ranadeep walked in from behind the stage. He had changed into a party suit and looked decent and smart. So, that's why he had been missing from the scene, I thought to myself.

"I hope you are having a lovely time here. And, I also hope you people had an amazing time at the fashion show."

Everyone in the crowd cheered and clapped. Ranadeep needed no introduction, like he had said. Everyone knew him. Ria was standing at a corner with her friends, holding a glass of wine in her hand. Ranadeep continued speaking.

"On behalf of me and my entire team of organizers, I would like to congratulate the winners for their spectacular performance. Also, thank you all of you for being such an amazing audience."

He paused a little and began again," I would like to make a special mention to the winner of the event. What a scintillating performance! I would like to invite none other than Ria Chopra to the stage."

There was another round of applause in the crowd. Ria walked up to the stage. Ranadeep bent a little and extended his hand to help her climb up the pedestal. She stood at the centre and Ranadeep handed her the microphone.

"First of all, thank you, everyone! You all are amazing. You encouraged me in such an amazing manner back there that I had to perform to my best. Thank you, I love you all. Enjoy the party." Ria spoke, to a resounding clap from the public. She then started to get down the pedestal.

"Ria, just a minute!" Ranadeep called out from behind.

Ria stopped and turned back.

"Stay back, if you don't mind. I have something else to share too." Ranadeep smiled.

Ria looked around the crowd and gave a puzzled smile. She then back tracked her steps to come and stand beside Ranadeep.

Ranadeep cleared his throat.

"Ria, you were a revelation on stage. Every one of us saw that and let me tell you that you look as stunning now as well. You were undoubtedly the best tonight. Your attitude on stage and the way you carried yourself was phenomenal. And, the dance in your final performance only added to the terrific charisma that you inherently possess. But there is something else about you, Ria, something that struck me and has since then stayed there inside me. And, I cannot just let it stay there, latent and alone. I have to tell you this. I have to tell you how you make me feel because you make me feel so alive. There have been so many girls in my life but none of them even compare to you. When you walked in through the stage earlier in the evening, I looked at you and I knew you were the one. You were the one I had been looking for because you are so different. Your attitude separates you from the rest of the crowd. You took away my heart from me, Ria."

Ranadeep took out a rose from the back pocket of his suit. He then knelt down in front of Ria. A collective gasp of surprise resonated from the crowd.

“I have fallen in love with you, Ria. I have fallen in love with you. Madly, deeply and completely.” Ranadeep announced.

The entire crowd was staring at the scene on the stage. My own heart had been beating way too fast. Aditi looked at me, perplexed and in awe of what Ranadeep had just done. He had proposed to Ria in front of a whole crowd. People around me were whispering amongst each other. Ranadeep obviously had never gone out of his way for any other girl.

And, then something happened.

Ria walked up a few steps closer to Ranadeep. He stood up from his kneeling position. Ria's face contracted and took a serious look. As everyone looked on, Ria raised her right hand and with a resounding sound that echoed through the entire crowd, she slapped Ranadeep right across his cheeks. Ranadeep's face swung to the other side. A stunned silence fell over the crowd. The hushed whispers that were floating around in the air just a minute back turned still all of a sudden. For a moment, I did not believe what I had just seen happening before my eyes.

“You people are all the same. Assholes.” Ria's voice broke through the silence.

“You guys think just because you find a girl hot, you could do anything to get her. All you men are the same. How did you even dare to say something like this to me in front of a whole bloody party? You think just because you organized the show and threw this party, you have the right to say and do anything you wish to? The entire college might fear you and do according to your whims and fancies, Mr. Ranadeep, but Ria Chopra will not. Ria is different and she sets her own rules. Keep this in mind for the rest of your life, do you get it?”

She then turned towards the crowd and roared into the microphone “What are you people staring at? The party is bloody over.” And, she stormed off the stage and out of the grounds in her same haughty manner. The two friends of hers followed her in haste as the rest of the people looked on, completely stumped by what all they had just been witness to.

I ran to the stage to Ranadeep.

“What the ...? Are you all right?” I asked, still dazed.

Ranadeep was smiling, a reaction that completely befuddled me.

“Why are you smiling?” I asked him.

Around us, the crowd was beginning to disperse in bits and fragments. The soft whispers had begun again. I knew that by the next morning, this incident would have spread like wild fire all around the university. This was no normal incident. Somebody, in fact, a

girl, a random girl had dared to not only reject Ranadeep's open proposal but had actually slapped him in front of a mass crowd. She had dared to challenge Ranadeep's position around the campus and she had done it in all her senses. Someone had dared to insult Ranadeep openly and had absolutely no qualms about it. This was something that had never been dreamt of by anyone in the entire university.

“This girl is a bomb!” Ranadeep's comment broke through my chain of thoughts.

“Excuse me?!” I looked at Ranadeep, totally stunned by his reaction.

“A random girl just managed to insult you in front of the whole college and all you have to say that she is a bomb?! What is wrong with you?” I stared at Ranadeep.

Aditi came to join us.

“Are you all right, Ranadeep?” She asked, hesitantly.

“I am more than all right. I am in love. I am madly in love with Ria Chopra.” Ranadeep spoke, as he continued to stare towards the side Ria had left from.

Aditi and I exchanged looks. Ranadeep was acting beyond our understanding.

“And, she is no random girl, Neel. She is no random girl.” He continued, referring to my previous comment.

“No person in the entire university has even dared to think what this girl just did in action. The people around here respect me but they also fear me. No one has dared to ever oppose me. And, this girl just defied everything. She denied accepting that she is part of a blind crowd. She sets her own rules, she said. And, nothing is sexier than a strong, bold and independent girl who creates her own world. I am impressed and her action has only made my desire for her stronger. I am going to get her, no matter what.”

“I cannot just understand you, Ranadeep. I just cannot. This is far from your normal and usual self.” I shook my head in exasperation and disbelief.

Ranadeep turned towards me and smiled.

“It is just what Ria has done to me.”

“Whatever it is, I think it is best that you don't get yourself too much involved. I know you wouldn't listen to anyone if you have decided upon something, but please, do use your mind too in whatever you do regarding this, okay?” I said.

Ranadeep nodded and smiled.

“Don't you have to go, now? It is already past Aditi's permitted entry time for today, isn't it?” He said.

“Hmm.. I'll drop her to her hostel and head back. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?” I said.

“Hmm, good night both of you.” Ranadeep said. “And, by the way, Aditi, you look beautiful tonight.” He added with a smile.

Aditi smiled back.

“Thank you! And, take care, okay.” She said.

“I will, don't worry.” Ranadeep said.

I hugged him and wished him good night.

I was silent as Aditi and I walked back together towards her hostel.

Aditi held my hand reassuringly.

“What happened? What are you thinking about?” She asked, softly.

“I don't know, Aditi. I don't know whether whatever Ranadeep is doing is right or not. I do not know what is going on in his mind. The man is very stubborn when it comes to things he wants and he has always got whatever he has desired.” I said, my voice showing strains of concern.

“But Ranadeep does not act without thinking. I am sure he must have thought of something. And, it's only a girl. I think he will get over it.” Aditi said.

“That is what I am afraid of. I have never seen him this serious about a girl. And, for the first time I have a feeling that he is not thinking his actions through. I really hope his desire does not become his obsession. Because of what I saw of Ria Chopra, she is not going to be easy. I just hope Ranadeep takes care of himself.” I said.

“He will. He is a grown up and mature guy. Maybe it's just a few days' crush that will soon die away. Don't exert yourself too much. Ranadeep will be all right.” Aditi looked into my eyes and said.

We had reached her hostel gates. I smiled at my sweetheart. I loved the way she always managed to calm down my nerves whenever a situation arose. I loved the way she just looked into my eyes and assured me that things would turn out just fine. I bent and kissed her on the cheek.

“I love you!” I whispered.

“I love you more. Bye.” She replied and turned to walk inside the gates. My eyes followed her till she reached the stairs.

Chapter 7

There is a slight difference between passion and obsession, just a little. In the next couple of days I came to realize that Ranadeep's desire for Ria had become his obsession. Till date he had got everything he desired, then how could he let her go. She had occupied his mind and heart completely.

For the next few days, I saw Ranadeep every day, waiting outside my classroom after classes, in hopes of talking to Ria. Ria, on the other hand, with the same air of attitude about her, ignored him daily as she walked past him without even casting a glance towards him. In the beginning, Ranadeep was very confident about himself. He knew he could get her if she agreed to talk to him just once. But that itself was not happening. I could see Ranadeep getting more and more dejected and restless with each passing day.

Time was running but Ranadeep was stuck right there, where Ria had rejected him.

P

It was Aditi's birthday. She hadn't told anyone in college about the day other than me. And, of course, I had to tell Ranadeep because I needed his help in finding me a romantic place to make the day special for her. Ranadeep's dad had built a small farmhouse not far off from their house. The place was rarely used except when his dad's friends or colleagues came to stay there for business purposes. Ranadeep suggested me to take Aditi there to celebrate her special day. I loved the idea. Aditi was a simple and demure type of girl. She was not very fond of fanfare or extravagant birthday parties. For her, her close ones' presence mattered more than any other thing in the world. So, I decided to plan a small surprise for her at the farmhouse.

Exactly at 11: 55 pm I called her. I loved her voice over the phone. There was an inexplicable innocence and cuteness in her voice when she talked over the phone. Like the cute voice of a little child. I had confessed to her several times before that every time I heard her voice over the phone, I fell in love with her all over again. She used to giggle every time in reply and that only made me fall for her deeper.

She picked up the phone and for the hundredth time, I felt myself falling in love with that voice. We talked for some minutes. The usual talk, as I waited for the clock to strike 12. A few seconds before midnight, I began the countdown. Ten, nine, eight, seven..... three, two, one.

“Many many happy returns of the day, baby. I love you!” I whispered on the phone.

“I love you too. Thank you.” My angel whispered back.

“So, is my baby ready for her gift?” I spoke adoringly.

“Neel, as long as you are there with me, I need no other gift. You are the best gift I could have ever wished for. Thank you for coming into my life and making it beautiful. I love you.”

“And, I promise to be always there with you, my love. But on your special day, I have a surprise for you. I am waiting outside your hostel. Come down quick.”

Aditi gasped in surprise. A moment later, I saw her face at the window. I waved and flew a kiss towards her.

“Neel... You crazy, you idiot!! What are you doing here? Are you mad? Do you realize what will happen if someone spots you here?” She said, her voice already panicking.

“Oho!! Baby, relax. No one is going to spot me. Your guards are fast asleep and the gate is broken so you can easily sneak out. Now are you going to come down or you'd rather have me inside your room?” I teased her, putting myself in through the broken crevice of the gate, as if trying to enter the hostel compound.

“No, no, no!! Wait!! Don't do that!! I am coming down!!” Aditi whispered in panic.

I was thoroughly enjoying myself. I moved back through the gate.

“That's like my baby.” I smiled in triumph.

Five minutes later, my girl was tiptoeing out of the hostel lobby. She kept glancing back in fear, lest someone should catch her sneaking out. The guard at the main gate was fast asleep in his little green, wooden chamber. Aditi looked at me from the other side of the gaping crevice. I extended my hand. She took my hand and stealthily made her way out of the crevice. She then looked back to check again.

“You are going to have me suspended from the hostel one day.” She hissed, making her ever so cute pout.

I winked at her.

“Come on, let's go,” I said, holding her hand.

She followed me obediently.

I had brought Raju's Pulsar with me.

“Where are you taking me? Let me know, please.” Aditi whined.

“Sshhh. You'll get to know in a while.” I replied. And, we drove off into the night.

I stopped the bike at a little distance away from the farmhouse. We got down and she waited as I parked the bike against a boundary wall. Aditi looked around herself. She obviously had never been to this area.

“Where are we, Neel?” she asked. I felt a slight hint of tension and fear in her voice.

“Just a little further, baby. And, you'll get to know. We are going to walk the distance.” And, I held her hand once again.

We walked for another five minutes before we reached the farmhouse. At the gate, I turned around, smiled at Aditi and wrapped my palms over her eyes.

“No cheating ok? Close your eyes.” I said.

“Neel...” she began but I cut her in between.

“Sssshhh!!! Just keep walking, baby.”

I guided her through the door, through a turn and into the hall where I had prepared everything for her. I removed my palms from her eyes and whispered softly into her ear.

“Happy birthday, my love!!!”

Aditi opened her eyes and the next moment cupped her hands over her mouth. The hall was illuminated by rows of candles that had been placed on the floor parallel to the four walls of the hall. White and violet balloons; her favourite colours, danced about on the floor. In the centre of the hall was a table and on it I had placed the birthday cake and a bouquet of red roses. The hall looked beautiful in the glow of the candles. Aditi stood there soaking in the feeling. She then looked at me. Our eyes locked and in those beautiful eyes in which shone the reflection of the golden light of the candles, I saw for me an unconditional love. I knew she wanted to say a lot of things but words were failing her, for her eyes did all the talking. She then wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me. I embraced her back, lovingly.

Holding her, I said,” let's cut the cake. I am starving!!”

We walked over to the table and I handed her the knife. She brought my hand on hers and together we cut the cake while I sang the birthday song to her. After we had fed each other a piece each, I bent down and brought a packet from under the table. I handed it to her.

“I want you to wear this and meet me at the terrace. I have another little surprise for you there. I am waiting for you there, okay. Can't wait to see you in this dress.” I smiled.

Aditi nodded and smiled back. I left her to change and made my way to the terrace upstairs.

On the terrace, I made sure that all the arrangements were properly done. The terrace had a fireplace and I had brought in wood and branches the day before and placed them there. I fished out a matchbox from my pocket and lighted up the fire. The branches crackled and glowed as the fire burnt. In front of the fireplace, I had prepared a make-shift restaurant. I had prepared all her favourite dishes and placed them on a low rise folding table. On opposite sides of the table, I had spread two mattresses and had placed a couple of cushions on each. I bent down and checked the dishes one last time. I was pleased with myself. I then went to poke at the fire. While I was doing so, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. They stopped at the door. I turned to look and there she was at the door, smiling at me. I stared at her. She looked stunning. Like a heavenly goddess. I had imagined her looking beautiful in the saree I had chosen for her but right then, looking at her, I realized she had surpassed all my expectations by huge bounds. The bold red saree accentuated her perfect figure. Her thick, black hair fell to her

shoulders and strands of it flew about her beautiful face and played in the gentle breeze that blew. She had worn the saree just below her waist line. Her exposed skin around the waist and her half visible navel made me realize what fantasies are made of. She looked at me and smiled in a shy manner. And, for the umpteenth time, I felt myself falling head over heels in love with the sheer beauty that stood before me. I kept on staring at her. She slowly walked over towards me, came close and clicked her fingers. I jerked, suddenly coming back to reality. I leaned in a little and came close to her face.

“You look ravishing, baby.” I whispered into her ear.

She smiled coyly. She looked over my shoulders and raised her eyebrows in delight.

“Now, let's eat, shall we? Aren't you starving now?” she laughed.

“Your wish is my command, princess!! Please have a seat in my humble place.” I bowed down dramatically.

She punched me playfully and we walked over to the fireplace. She squealed in delight when she saw her favourite dishes spread before her. In the cool breeze of the night and the warmth of the fire that crackled beside us, we had one of our most romantic dates.

After the dinner, which she absolutely loved, we sat together beside the fire. She laced her fingers in mine and rested her head against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and caressed her hair gently. The world, to us, seemed perfect at that moment. Neither of us spoke anything. The night was silent except our uncontrollable desires and the occasional crackling of the woods in the fire.

“Neel?” Aditi whispered.

“Yes, baby?”

She raised her face a little and looked at me with those deep, black, beautiful eyes.

“Thank you... for this, for everything.” She said, her voice dripping with love.

Her face glistened in the glow of the fire. She looked more beautiful than the epitome of beauty, if there existed any.

I brought my hands to her face and placing them on her cheeks, I pulled her face softly towards me. I felt her breath go heavy. She hesitated a moment. But in the next, she let herself loose and allowed herself to be pulled closer to me. As the distance between our faces receded, I was aware of her quickening heartbeat. She closed her eyes. I looked at her face, felt a surge of love rush through me and closing my eyes, I brought my lips to hers. She let her hands slowly rest against my back. Our lips rubbed softly against each other. I felt her hands tighten against my body, her breath growing heavier with each passing second. And then, I let my lips slowly clasp hers. I kissed her lower lip. Her hands clenched my shirt at the back. I brought down my hand from her face and ran it along her bare waist. I felt a tinge of current pass through her body. Then she took in a deep breath and kissed me back. We kissed each other, each kiss brimming with a

passion greater than the previous one. I let my hands run down her delicate skin and explore her tender body. I wanted to know every curve, every freckle, and every shiver of her body. I laid her gently on the mattress. And that night, under the vast, starlit sky, in the warmth of the crackling firewood and engulfed in the heat of passion, two people completely and madly in love, made passionate love to each other. We made love the whole night and when we were finished, I wrapped my arms around her and watched her as she slowly slipped into deep slumber.

A night, I wished never came to an end.

P

“She doesn't even look at me, yaar!” Ranadeep said to me one evening, as I came out of the class with Aditi. He was as usual standing outside the class. Ria had just walked past him.

I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“Ranadeep, brother, let her go. There isn't a dearth of girls around you, is there?” I tried to speak to him.

“No!” Ranadeep said, raising his voice sternly. I was taken aback by his reaction.

“When I say, I want Ria, I mean I want her and her only. No other girl around here or anywhere else is Ria Chopra, do you understand?” Ranadeep said, his mannerism stark different from his usual self.

He left before I could say anything further. I sighed and walked off to where Aditi was waiting for me.

The college was getting ready for the annual “Ethnic Day” celebrations to be held a couple of days later. The cultural society members organized the festivities every year. The smaller of the two college grounds was used for this purpose. Tents were constructed with bamboos and cloth and students set up different stalls representing all the major states of the country. Stalls ranged from local cuisine of every state to handicrafts and games specific to the particular states. “Ethnic day” also meant that everyone was supposed to be dressed in ethnic Indian wear. Everyone was excited about the day.

I hadn't seen Ranadeep in the last two days, after our brief talk that day outside the class. He hadn't shown up to wait for Ria and I did not get time to go visit him either. I finally met him on the grounds that day. He was dressed in a deep red sherwani. His face lacked the usual energy and glow. He gave me a grim smile when he saw me.

“Where have you been? I didn't see you in college the last two days?” I asked with concern.

“I was at home. Didn't come to college. I haven't been feeling like lately. Today too, I have come only to meet Ria.” Ranadeep said.

“Meet Ria?” I asked, not understanding what he meant to say.

“Hmm.. I will go up to her and propose her again.” Ranadeep revealed.

“What?” I asked, shocked. “But, Ranadeep, she isn't even talking to you.”

“But I will go and talk to her today, at any cost. She has to listen to me. She has to know how madly I have fallen in love with her. I'll see you later, okay?” Ranadeep said and walked away.

I shook my head at Ranadeep's madness about the girl and walked off towards Aditi's hostel to meet her.

The ground wore a festive look as the evening progressed. Little bulbs were tied on strings and draped over the trees and stalls. The aroma of local ethnic cuisine rose into the air. People roamed about in traditional attire. Aditi had put on a pretty pink lehenga choli and had tied her hair in a braid. She looked like a cute Rajasthani village girl to me. I, on the other hand was content with a cream kurta pajama. We roamed around for sometime checking out the various stalls after which Aditi was called upon by her friends. I gave her a puppy face look as she left me to go with her friends.

Having nothing else to do, I strolled about the ground. I looked around for Adi or Ranadeep for company. Finding none, I decided to call up Adi. I walked towards the back of a stall where there would be less noise. As I was about to step closer, I stopped.

“Don't you understand something once? How dare you approach me again?” Ria was saying. Ranadeep stood facing her.

“But, Ria what is the problem? I love you, yaar. Can't you see this? I cannot stop thinking about you. I have been trying to talk to you since so many days but you just ignore me and walk off. You are the first girl in my life who dared to slap me in front of a whole crowd. And, believe me that only made me admire you all the more. I love your attitude, I love the confidence you carry. I just love everything about you. And, what is the problem? I am rich, I am famous and influential and our social status matches. Where is the problem, Ria?” Ranadeep was almost pleading to her. This is the first time I was seeing him like this, literally begging to her.

“The problem is that I just don't love you. Is it that difficult for you to understand? You are no different than the hundreds of guys who fall for my looks and come after me looking for a relationship. Each of you is the same. Look, Mr. Ranadeep, I do not give a rat's arse about how rich you are or how famous you are. And, if you trouble me again another time, I'll make sure your high influences come in no use when I lodge a police complaint against you for harassing me. Do you understand? Now, get off my way.” Ria flagged him off, rudeness dripping from each word that she uttered. She walked off haughtily, leaving Ranadeep standing there in silence. He did not try to stop her. He seemed on the verge of crying.

I stood there looking at Ranadeep for a while. I felt bad for my brother and angry at Ria

for not understanding him. I walked over to him.

“Ranadeep!!” I said, walking over to him.

“I have been looking for you everywhere and here you are!! Come on, let's go!! There is such awesome display of local street food out there. My stomach can barely shut up. It's been growling since the evening.” I said cheerfully. I did not tell him that I had heard Ria and his conversation.

“I'll go home. I need a drink.” Ranadeep said grimly.

“But, Ranadeep...” I began. I could not complete my sentence. He had already stridden off. I sighed and called up Adi and spent the rest of the evening strolling about the grounds with him.

The next day, I called up Ranadeep. Raju answered his phone.

“Raju? Where is Ranadeep?” I asked.

“He's in his room, Neel bhaiya. He said he does not wish to talk to anyone. He has locked himself up in his room and has been drinking all day.” Raju replied.

“I'll come by in the evening, okay.” I said.

“Okay, Neel bhaiya.”

I disconnected the phone. After classes, I told Aditi I was going to see Ranadeep at his home. I called up Raju again.

“Has he come out of the room?” I asked.

“Only when he needed to refill his drinks. He has not eaten anything since the morning nor is he willing to talk or meet anyone.” Raju replied in a tense tone.

“I'll be there in ten minutes.” I said and disconnected the phone.

I took an auto and reached Ranadeep's place. Raju met me at the hall.

“Neel bhaiya! Ranadeep bhaiya refuses to come out of his room. Maa is not in town too otherwise he would have listened to her. I have been asking him to eat something since the morning but he isn't listening. He has locked his room from inside and has been drinking without a stop. Please, tell him something. He might listen to you.” Raju said with concern.

I walked over to his room and knocked on his door.

“Just get out, Raju! I told you not to disturb me. Doesn't your pea brain understand? Leave me alone! Get off!!” Ranadeep shouted from inside. His voice was loaded with drunkenness.

“Ranadeep, it is me, Neel. Open the door.” I said, calmly.

“What are you doing here? I am absolutely fine. Go away. I don't want to talk to anyone.”

Ranadeep bellowed.

“Ranadeep, look, open the door, brother. This is not the way to be. You have been drinking all day in that closed room. Come out, please. Let's go out and eat something, yeah?” I said, trying my best to cheer him up.

“I said I don't want to meet anyone!! Leave me alone!! Raju!! Get Neel out of here right now.” Ranadeep screamed. A bottle crashed on the floor and gave a shattering noise.

“Ranadeep, please, yaar!!” I said.

“Go. Now!!” He screamed.

I looked at Raju behind me. He gave me a helpless look.

“Let him be today. He wants to be alone. Maybe, he'll be alright by tomorrow.” I spoke to Raju.

“But, Neel bhaiya!! He will make himself sick by drinking so much.” Raju said.

“Let him be for now, Raju. He is very upset right now and won't listen to anyone. You do one thing. Prepare his dinner and keep it outside his room. He'll have it when he feels hungry, okay?” I told Raju.

“Okay, Neel bhaiya.” He replied.

“And, don't worry; he'll probably be fine by tomorrow.” I gave Raju a smile.

“I really hope so, Neel Bhaiya. I am worried about Ranadeep bhaiya now.” Raju said.

I asked Raju not to worry too much and take care of Ranadeep. I left the house, concern gripping me all over.

... I Love you Rachu ...

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

I think see knows my name

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Chapter 8

Over the next few days, Ranadeep proved how wrong my statement to Raju had been. Instead of getting better, he was beginning to worsen his condition. He hadn't come out of his room the next day. He had only ordered Raju to get him more drinks and had screamed at him badly when Raju had tried to refuse. Raju was left with no choice. He hadn't opened the door to me or to any of his other friends either. Slowly, all his other friends had stopped coming over to his house because Ranadeep had been adamant. As for me, I made it a point to go there every evening after classes. It was a whole week before he opened the door to me.

I was struck by what Ranadeep had done to himself. His hair was uncombed and fell all over his face. He had not shaved which had resulted in a messy and unkempt beard all over his face. His eyes had sunk deep into their sockets and huge swellings of red had formed under his eyes. He was visibly high and my own eyes widened in shock when I saw the packets of white powder on his table. Ranadeep had been taking drugs! I looked at him in a state of perpetual shock. He staggered and somehow dragged himself to his bed. I went inside his room. The stench of alcohol, smoke and drugs made me nauseate. I looked all around me. Pictures and posters of Ria were pasted on the walls. At places, the line "I LOVE YOU RIA" was inked in red. A chill ran down my spine as the thought crossed my mind. I immediately turned to Ranadeep and looked at his hand. I stared at him in horror as I saw a deep cut gaping widely from the back of his hand.

"What the...?" I cried as I found myself at a loss of words. "You... you cut your hand and... wrote... wrote that?"

Ranadeep did not look at me. He lay on his back on the bed.

"Ria... I love you, Ria.." he was murmuring to himself.

"Raju!! Raju!!" I called loudly.

"Yes, yes.. Neel bhaiya?" Raju came running into the room.

"Get the first aid box, quick!" I said. "He's slit his hand."

Raju looked at me, his face turning white with fear. He then ran into the hall and came back with the medicine box. We applied an antiseptic and bandaged Ranadeep's cut. He seemed to take no care. He was hardly in his senses.

"He hasn't met anyone all these days." Raju began, his voice cracking with concern. "He doesn't go out. He has cut off from everyone. Even I just see him only when I come to give him his food."

I suddenly knew what I had to do. I could not see my best friend and brother in this condition anymore. His obsession for Ria had crossed its limits now. Ria will have to come to him. I made up my mind. I placed my hand on Ranadeep's shoulder.

“Things will be fine. I shall see to it now.” I spoke softly and left the house.

P

Aditi and I didn't believe in publicizing our relationship, so we never behaved like a couple during class hours. We sat with our friends, away from each other. Among my friends, only Adi and Ranadeep knew about us. Since we did not talk to each other in the class, we always met each other after classes. The next day, I walked Aditi towards her hostel after classes.

“Neel, how is Ranadeep now? Did you meet him?” she asked me.

“Worse than before. He has started taking drugs now.” I told her, my mind wandering to last evening's scene at his home.

“What?” Aditi asked, visibly shocked. “Who told you about it?”

“I saw it myself. I had gone to see him yesterday evening too. He had finally opened his door and I saw it lying on his table and he was high. Do you know what he has done to himself over Ria?”

“What?” Aditi asked.

“Ranadeep had slit his hand and painted the wall with his blood!” I told her.

“WHAT?!!” Aditi looked at me, her face going pale with shock.

“Yes... he has made Ria his obsession now. He does not see anything beyond her. And when he is unable to get to her, he has shut himself up from everything else. He has stopped taking calls and does not go out nor does he entertain any friends at his place. He has cut himself off completely from the outside world.” I said to Aditi.

“But, Neel, we cannot leave him in this condition, can we? We have to do something to get Ranadeep out of the mess he has created for his life.” Aditi said with a concern laden voice.

“I know. And, I am going to do it for my brother.” I said.

“What are you going to do?” Aditi asked.

“I will have to talk to Ria on my own now. Make her understand what she means to Ranadeep and what he has done to himself without her.” I said decidedly.

“You want to talk to Ria about Ranadeep? Why will she even listen to you?” Aditi asked.

“I'll have to befriend her first, Aditi.” I explained. “Even if I do not like her a bit and cannot tolerate her attitude, I'll have to do this for my best friend's life. I cannot see him rotting his life this way.” I said, as we reached the gates of her hostel. I gave Aditi a little peck on the cheek and told her I'd be calling her at night. I walked towards my own hostel, Ranadeep's pitiable image still hovering on my mind.

Till then, I had taken the decision. The decision that I would not let Ranadeep ruin his life. Decision of making Ria understand about Ranadeep's love. No matter whatever consequences I would have to face for it.

P

Our second set of assignment tests were announced two days later in the class. It was time for Adi and me to start spending time in the library. I invited Aditi in too but she said she had to help another friend of hers with the preparations so she would pass.

“Aha!! So, I taught you in the beginning and now you are teaching others. That's like a good student.” I teased Aditi.

“Oh, please! I have always been a good student. You helped me in the beginning because you wanted to hit on me, nothing else.” Aditi retorted, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, hello, madam!” I said. “You wouldn't have even passed the first assignment test if I hadn't helped you with it.” I raised my eyes in mock anger.

Aditi rolled out her tongue in reply. I pulled at her nose and she crinkled it adoringly.

Adi and I began our library marathon. We used to come to the library an hour before the commencement of our classes and then again after classes got over in the evening. One evening, I was walking into the library with Adi when we saw Ria arguing with the librarian over something.

“What rubbish! How can you not have the guide book? And, you say this is a library? Bloody hell!!” she was saying.

Adi and I looked at each other. Adi shook his head and walked off towards our seat. He had lost interest in Ria after Ranadeep's incident. The librarian was trying to say something to Ria but she wasn't ready to listen. She was just unstoppable.

“I am going to complain to the authorities, do you understand? I am not going to spare you.” Ria was saying, her voice crossing the permitted decibel levels of the library.

I realized this was an apt opportunity for me to talk to Ria. I walked up to the librarian's desk.

“What is the matter?” I asked politely.

Ria turned to look at me and then immediately turned back to the librarian.

“She wants the guide books for the various subjects. I have been telling her that we don't keep guide books, Neel. But she...” The librarian began.

“But she what? Haan?” Ria cut him in between. “How are we supposed to study if you don't keep the guide books? How are we supposed to cram up the thick text books all by ourselves?”

“Oh, God! I am so going to flunk this test too!!” Ria spoke to herself. She then turned

towards me.

“Aren't you in my class?” she asked, as if on sudden realization.

“Umm... yes, I am.” I nodded.

“Then you tell me, how are we supposed to study if these people here do not keep the guide books? Do they want me to fail again? The assignment tests are just two weeks away, how am I supposed to do it? How are you going to do it?” She ranted on.

“Umm... I take notes in the class when the professors teach.” I said. “So, I don't really need guide books.”

Ria looked at me flaringly, like she would shoot me for not taking her side against the poor librarian.

“I can help you with the preparation if you want.” I took my chance. “I come here every day with my friend. It would be good for me too, you know, I wouldn't have to sit and revise again. Helping you prepare would automatically take care of my revision.”

Ria looked at me with narrowed eyebrows.

“You mean you can help me pass the tests? I had flunked the previous one.” She asked me doubtfully.

“I can help you prepare. Passing the test entirely depends on how much hard work you put in.” I said.

“And, how much are you going to charge for this?” She asked.

“What?” I looked at her flabbergasted.

“I'll have to pay you for teaching me, right? How much do you need?” she asked, nonchalantly.

“I don't need any of your money.” I spoke in a serious tone, still unable to register what she had just assumed. And, my best friend was ruining his life out there for her. What the crap!

“I am just trying to help a fellow classmate, not running a business here.” I finished.

Ria shrugged.

“Okay, cool. So, tomorrow after classes? Okay?” She asked.

“Yeah.” I answered.

I stared at her as she walked away. I looked at the librarian who gave me a “thank you” look. Looking up towards the sky, I prayed to God to give me strength to go about successfully in my plan to help Ranadeep.

Chapter 9

As I began to spend part of my evenings with her at the library, I realized Ria was not that big a nuisance after all. She did have an attitude, but I began to get used to it. As for my study plans with Adi, I had to shift it completely to the mornings since he didn't want to be anywhere near Ria. Things were seemingly going fine. Ria and I were actually becoming friends and now I just had to wait for the right moment to bring in Ranadeep's topic before her.

“All right then, we are done with most of the chapters. We will begin with the last chapter tomorrow as well as start with the other subjects, okay?” I said one evening, as I closed the notes.

“We still have a lot of time. We can finish the last chapter now, can't we? It's too early as per usual days.” Ria asked.

“No, let it be this much for today. You cannot remember anything if you study everything all at once. We will do it tomorrow.” I said, getting up.

“So, where are you going? I could drop you in my car.” Ria suggested.

I was leaving early because I had promised to take Aditi out for a movie. I of course could not tell Ria about this.

“Umm...no, thanks, I'll walk with Adi. Plus, we have plans.” I said.

“All right, then. See you tomorrow. Bye.” She smiled.

“B...Bye.” I smiled back and walked off.

Later in the evening, I picked up Aditi from her hostel. We walked together to the auto stand.

“So, how are things going with Ria?” Aditi asked. “Did you talk to her about Ranadeep yet?”

“Not yet” I shook my head. “Actually, I haven't found the right time yet. She has just begun to treat me as a friend. I don't want to risk the chances by acting in haste.” I said.

“Hmm.” Aditi replied. “So, what are you thinking of doing?”

“I think I should wait a few more days, till our assignment tests are over, maybe. By then, we will have known each other a bit more. Moreover, if she passes the tests, she will be more trusting of me and will be willing to listen to me. So, I can make a safe bet then.” I said.

We had reached the auto stand by then. The auto drove us to the movie theatre. As it turned out, the movie bored us both to death by the interval and I suggested we go somewhere else. We came out of the theatre and walked along the almost empty street, our hands clasped with each other. This was something we both loved; walking hand in

hand in silence. It gave us both a sense of completeness, like nothing else mattered in the world when we both were together. Aditi leaned her head on my arms. And, then it rained. I held Aditi and we scurried along looking for a shelter. It was an empty street and no one was around. Finally, the roof of a closed shop came to our rescue and we ran to stand under it.

I looked at Aditi. She was drenched completely and wiping off water from her arms. Her green kurta clung to her body and little drops of water hung from the corner of her lips. Strands of wet hair fell on her face. I came closer to Aditi and brushed aside a strand of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. She looked at me. I brought my hand to her face and gently wiped off the water droplets from her lips. I then brought my face close to hers.

“Neel...” she whispered as she closed her eyes.

We kissed. The rain spilling fire in our souls, we kissed for a long time. And then we sat there on the parapet of the little shop, Aditi's head resting on my shoulder as we waited for the rain to stop, each secretly wishing that it did not.

P

As the assignment test inched closer, Ria and I started spending more and more time in the library together. I helped her bit by bit as we went through all the chapters and notes. We had almost become good friends by now. We used to go out on mini coffee breaks whenever one or both of us got tired of teaching or studying, joked with each other and had our share of fun. I began to feel like now I could talk to her about Ranadeep but I wanted to wait till the test results.

“I need coffee!! Badly!!” Ria raised her eyebrows and declared, one such evening.

“We just had one an hour ago.” I argued, giving her a puzzled look.

“Yeah, but this chapter has drained out all my energy. I cannot focus anymore. I will fall asleep if you turn another page. Come on, let's go. My treat!” She retaliated.

I looked at Ria suspiciously. She answered back with a broad grin.

“You are doing this to escape the studies, aren't you?” I said, still eyeing her sternly.

She made an exaggerated expression feigning mock amazement.

“How could you even think that way, Neel? Do I look that kind of a girl to you? Haven't I been a good student this far?” she cupped her palms to her mouth and widened her eyes.

I shook my head and smiled.

“Okay, drama queen! Now, can we cut the drama, please? Let's go. But first, you will have to promise me that you will finish up this chapter after we return.” I said.

“Yes, sir!” she brought her hand to a salute and laughed.

We walked out of the library towards the coffee shop. I stopped and looked at Ria.

“What?” Ria asked.

“Umm... I have been thinking.... that coffee has become too monotonous for us, hasn't it? Every day, the same thing. Let' try something else, today. What say?” I said.

“Something else, like what? Pizza?” Ria asked, excitedly.

“Have you ever tried the golgappas right across the street?” I rolled my eyes at her, knowing well that she hadn't.

“Wait! Wait! Wait! You mean you want me to eat food sold on the street? Hah! In your dreams, Mr. Neel!” Ria said, as she flipped her hair and looked away from me.

I laughed.

“Challenge accepted, madam. Let's go. I bet you will forget all your high class Italian and continental cuisine once you have had those lip smacking golgappas.” I said.

“I am not going anywhere! God!! All the things those people do with their hands and then they prepare the filling with those same hands. And, then they dip those into the water. EWWW!! So unhygienic!” Ria said, making an exasperated face.

“Haha! You make it sound really bad. It's not that bad. In fact, you will find it heavenly, trust me.” I said, tucking at her arm.

She pulled away her hand dramatically.

“Oye, Miss Drama Queen! Let's cut the drama and go. Otherwise, I am dragging you back to the library and into that monotonous chapter right now.” I said, folding my arms and looking away.

“You cannot blackmail me like that!!” She stared at me with big eyes.

“Oh, yes, I can. Now, come one. Let's go. I am hungry!!” I said, pulling her with me. She let herself be dragged along reluctantly.

“They do not use water from the drain, do they?” she asked me as we reached the golgappa stall.

I laughed out loud. She eyed the entire stall and the guy selling the golgappas suspiciously, as if looking for some evidence to support her arguments.

“Look Neel, if I fall ill after having this and I miss my tests, you are to be held responsible, all right?” She said, as the guy handed out our paper plates.

“All right, ma'am. You can sue me using all your high profile lawyer contacts and all. Is that fine with you?” I said, smiling.

“Hmm.” She said, giving me an airy look.

We stood there and gulped down our golgappas. Ria ended up eating two dozen of them by the end. I stared at her in disbelief as I finished my tenth one.

“They weren't that bad, you know. I liked it.” Ria said, in a matter of fact manner.

“You beat me to it! And then you say you just liked it? You have fallen in love with it!” I teased her, my mouth full with a golgappa.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Whatever.” Ria said.

I laughed and she laughed with me. I paid the guy and we began walking back to the library.

“My stomach is full and now I feel sleepy.” Ria complained.

“Do not even think about it, Miss Ria Chopra. We are not leaving until we finish with the last chapter.” I eyed her sternly.

“But, Neel...” She began.

“No... no, you promised me, remember? And a promise should be honoured.” I cut her in between.

She made a face and kept quiet. I shook my head and smiled.

“Okay, half the chapter. I am giving you a concession just for today.” I said, without looking at her.

A long grin curved up on her face.

“You are the best teacher in the entire world!!” she pulled my cheeks and exclaimed. I laughed. We walked along in silence.

We were about to cross the street. Ria was walking a step ahead of me. As she stepped forward, suddenly a bike zoomed past her at a dangerously close distance. She jumped back on reflex.

“What the fuck?” she said, shocked.

“Are you all right?” I asked her as I ran up to her.

The guys on the bike looked back and sneered.

“Bloody assholes!” Ria grumbled.

I held her arm. She looked at me.

“Let's go.” I said and we crossed the road together.

We were walking down the other side of the road.

“There they are! The assholes.” Ria said, pointing ahead with her eyes.

The two guys had parked their bike beside a shop, a little ahead of us. They laughed as they puffed out smoke from their cigarettes.

“Keep walking without looking at them, okay?” I told Ria.

As we came nearer to the shop, one of the guys started to whistle. Ria glared at him.

“Ah! The look you give me. It kills me like sweet poison.” The other guy commented lecherously, insinuating a peal of laughter from the other guy. They slapped their palms together as we walked passed them.

“Oho, baby! Don't leave me alone. Spend a night with us too, sometime, won't you?” The other guy called out. We had already passed them by then. I looked at Ria beside me. Her face was red with anger.

“What happened, baby? Come to me tonight.” The other spoke behind us.

I stopped in my tracks. I looked at Ria and then turned back. I started to walk towards the men.

“Neel... Neel... stop... where are you going?” Ria called behind me, pacing in her steps towards me.

“Wait, here, Ria. I'll be back in a minute.” I said.

“Neel, leave it... Where are you going?” she asked.

“Wait here.” I said again, strictly this time.

I walked over to where the guys were still sitting and smoking.

“Come and say sorry to the girl.” I said, looking them both straight in the eye.

“What?” One of the guys asked, throwing his cigarette butt on the ground. He crushed it on the mud with his shoes.

“You misbehaved with the girl, go and say sorry to her.” I repeated myself.

The boys started to laugh. They weren't too old, younger than me probably. Not at all of a great build, they almost looked just out of school.

“You aren't listening to me.” I spoke.

“So, what are you going to do?” one of them said, still laughing.

I brought my fingers into a fist and punched the guy on the face. He staggered and hit himself on the bike's handle. The other guy had got up by then. He raised up his hand but I caught it in mid air and twisted it behind his back. I then hit him with my elbow on his shoulder and he yelped in pain and fell to the ground. I picked up the other guy by his collar and landed another punch on his face. I kicked the other one on the stomach and he lay on the ground, bent double with pain. I then dragged the one I was holding to where Ria was standing.

“Say sorry to her.” I said, pushing him to the ground at Ria's feet.

The guy looked at me and then back at Ria. I raised my fist again.

“No... No, don't hit me. I am sorry! I am really sorry, sister. It won't happen again.” He

stammered.

Ria came forward and landed a tight slap right across the man's face.

“You dare not again! Get lost now!” She said.

I released the guy's collar and he scampered back to his bike. The two then drove off from the place.

Ria looked at me.

“Thank you.” She said, looking straight into my eyes.

“For what? I did not do a single thing. The guy ran off because you slapped him. What a shot, by the way! Clean bowled!!” I winked at her and said.

“Shut up!” Ria made a face.

I brought my fingers to my lips and covered my face with my hand dramatically.

“Please, don't slap me!” I said, still overacting.

Ria began laughing hysterically.

“Look at yourself! And, then you call me a drama queen. You must then own the drama kingdom.” She said.

“I am not the only one being the teacher here, you see. You are my guru in drama.” I replied.

“Very funny. Let's go now. We have half the chapter to complete, don't we?” Ria said, smiling.

“Yes, guru ji!” I winked and we set off to the library.

We did finish the entire chapter that night; no just half as I had promised Ria. She said she wasn't sleepy anymore and could sit through the entire chapter easily. I had given her a surprised look and she had just smiled.

Chapter 10

The assignment tests came and went. Adi had aced the tests this time with me being just close behind. Aditi had performed very well too. And as for Ria, she had surpassed her own expectations and mine too. I had seen her jaws dropping to the floor when the results were declared. She even did a victory jig right outside the classroom.

“Eeeeeeee.!!!” She yelped with joy as she caught up with me during the recess.

“Well done, my student! I am proud of you!!” I joked, smiling at her expressive glee.

“Neel!! Really, thank you, thank you so much!! I couldn't have done this without you.” She said and hugged me tightly.

“I am not taking your thank you!” I said.

“What?” Ria asked.

“Where's my treat?” I asked, feigning a hurt look.

“A treat you shall due fully receive, my sire!” Ria started with her drama. “Golgappa down the street!!”

“What? You mean you want me to eat the food sold at the street? Do you know how unhygienic they are?” I said, mimicking her expression.

“Oh, cut the drama, drama king!” She said, imitating me. We both laughed.

“I see someone is totally in love with golgappas now!!” I teased her.

“So I am! Guilty as charged.” She said. “After classes?” she asked.

“Yep!” I said.

And thus our friendship grew. Meanwhile, Ranadeep's condition had been improving a little. He still drank a lot and preferred staying indoors but he had stopped taking drugs and had begun inviting friends at home too. He had somewhere begun to keep his pain and sadness to himself. He had stopped expressing himself like he used to earlier, even to me. He did mingle with friends but he had learnt to veil his emotions.

I was hogging on golgappas with Ria at our usual place one evening after classes. It had become a weekly routine for us now. I used to tease her that she had become middle class in my company. She said she didn't mind.

We were walking back towards the campus.

“Neel?” Ria looked at me.

“Yes, Ria?” I asked.

“I had something important to share with you.” She said.

“Yes, tell me.” I asked.

“Umm... Not here. Let's sit somewhere. That place over there?” she asked, pointing to the open air arena ahead of us.

“All right. Whatever you say.” I replied.

We sat next to each other on the platform. Ria did not say anything. An awkward silence ensued between us.

“What happened? Is something wrong, Ria? You can always tell me, you know.” I asked, breaking the silence between us.

“Do you think I am a good person, Neel?” Ria asked, making a child like face.

I looked at Ria, puzzled by her abrupt and strange question.

“Why, of course, you are, Ria. You are a great person. I love the way you carry yourself with so much confidence. I love the zeal that you possess for life. You have a charismatic personality, you are gorgeous looking. Very few girls I know can match up to what you are. I confess I did not like you in the beginning but I did not know you then. After all this time we have spent, I find you an amazing girl, Ria.” I said to her. I meant every word that I had said.

Ria suddenly turned and hugged me tightly.

“Oh, Neel! I knew it. I knew I wasn't wrong and I hadn't been building castles in the air. I knew you love me. And, I love you too, Neel. I love you very much!!” Ria said.

I jerked her away from me.

“What?” I asked, startled and bewildered. “What are you saying?”

“Oh, come on. Now quit being this shy and sweet. You know what I am talking about. I know you have feelings for me. I have known this ever since your gestures towards me during the test preparations. But you were hesitant to propose to me, right? You thought I would reject you like the many others that I have. You are an idiot. I can never reject you. I love you a lot! Look, I have made things easier for you. I proposed to you myself.” Ria was beaming with excitement and happiness.

For a moment, everything around me came to a standstill. Ranadeep's drunken and swollen face swirled before my eyes. I looked at Ria in shock and disbelief.

“What are you saying, Ria? What is wrong with you all of a sudden?” I asked her, getting up from my place.

“What do you mean, Neel?” Ria said; her face changing colour. What was a blush of red till this moment was suddenly turning pale.

“I do not have any such feelings for you, Ria. You are an amazing friend and that is all. I have never looked at you in any other manner. Ever. Who gave you all this idea? I can't believe it!” I spoke, exasperated.

Ria stared at me in silence.

“All the time that we spent together, all those gestures...” She started.

“What gestures, Ria?” I broke in between. “I helped you prepare for the test because I wanted to help a fellow classmate. And, what gestures are you talking about? I fought with those eve teasers that day because that is what anyone would do in my place. I would have done that for any other girl, too. And, our eating out together? That has always been on a friendship level. Never beyond that. Did I ever do anything to suggest that I have feelings for you? No, right? Then how could you even think like that?” I said. I was more than appalled at her.

“But you just said you find me an amazing person, didn't you? You said you haven't met anyone like me. So, what is the problem, Neel? I love you and we can be together!!” Ria said, her tone hurt and hopeful at the same time.

“I am committed, Ria.” I declared.

“Aditi and I are in love with each other. And, there is no other girl who can take her place in my life. We have been together for months now.” I said.

Ria's eyes widened as she let my words sink in.

“You mean, you and Aditi...?” Ria spoke.

“Huh. How can you choose her over me? Look at me. I have everything... good-looks, personality, money, fame... everything. And, you chose that middle class girl over me? Unbelievable!” She snapped.

“Ria!” I raised my voice. “Watch your tongue! I won't take you spewing insults at my girlfriend. You have been a very nice friend to me and if you want that I do not spoil and finish the friendship, you will walk away from here right now.” I warned her.

Ria stared at me with fire in her eyes. “I cannot let this happen... you will have to be mine.” She said, her teeth gritting with anger. Her face had turned red.

“It can never happen.” I opposed.

“No one ever refuses Ria Chopra, Neel. I have always got what I have desired and I am not going to be defeated this time, too. Not from some middle class village girl. I will have you at any cost.” Ria hissed. She turned back and walked away to her car. That was the last we talked for over a couple of months to come.

P

I had not told anyone about the incident between Ria and me, not even to Aditi. I did not want her to feel insecure or otherwise in any ways. Moreover, I had not taken Ria's words seriously. I did think about it for a couple of days but had shrugged it off as childishness on Ria's part. Ranadeep too had been taking better care of himself. It almost seemed that he was finally getting over his obsession for Ria. So, I decided to just forget

the matter. No one noticed that I was not talking to Ria anymore.

Aditi and I were sitting on a park bench one evening after classes. Holding hands, she rested her head on my shoulders as we talked about the events of the day. Aditi loved to lean her head on my shoulders.

"I love the hills, you know." She said.

"The hills? Why?" I asked.

"Hmm... I don't know. I just feel like I am a mountain person. I have always craved for the hills. The winding roads, the cool air, the clouds, bonfire and the sunset over the hills... it all seems so dreamlike, something that I have always wished to experience. And you know, especially during this season, just before the arrival of the monsoons, the hills are like magic." Aditi said, her voice like in a trance.

"Have you ever been to one?" I asked.

"Mmm... hmm." She said, her voice suddenly turning a bit sad. "Not yet... Have never been able to arrange the money for a hill station travel. But it is among the firsts on my bucket list. Once I start earning, I'll save a bit every day and then one day when I have enough, I will just run away to the mountains." She said, her voice brightening immediately at the thought.

I glanced at her. In her eyes, I saw dreams and wishes that had remained unfulfilled, yet there was that gleam of hope. That light in her eyes that always brightened up my day.

"What?" she asked as she saw me staring at her. Her eyes twinkled.

"Nothing." I said, smiling and I kissed her hair.

"What would you do with the first salary that you'll receive?" Aditi asked.

"Well, I have never thought about it. I will definitely want to give the entire amount to my parents but I know they would not accept even a penny. So, now I am thinking, I'll just share the amount with you and we would go to some far away hill station together, what say?" I smiled at her.

Aditi laughed.

"It would be our little pre-wedding honeymoon." I said and winked at her.

She slapped me gently on my cheeks. I made a face.

"Shameless creature." She said, with shyness engulfing her face.

"What? Did I say anything wrong?" I asked with a crooked smile on my lips.

Aditi smiled and looked away.

"I wish the day would come soon when I would be able to travel to my dreams. You know, sometimes, I wish I could just run away. Just to escape this monotonous life and

explore new places. I wish I had money now and I could have taken off, you know. Into the mountains and amongst the clouds” Aditi said, looking up into the sky.

“You never know, Aditi. Maybe you will.” I said as I rubbed her hands on mine. Aditi sighed and smiled.

We sat there in silence as the evening progressed and the night set in, transforming everything around us into magical silhouettes.

P

The college was scheduled to remain closed a week later for a duration of four days owing to some administrative glitch. There was a collective jubilation from the students as soon as the notice was put up. My eyes gleamed as I realized my opportunity.

“I can't meet you for a week now.” I told Aditi next day, as we came out of the class.

“Why?” she asked.

“I have some urgent work to do. I won't be attending classes as well.” I said.

“And what is that urgent work that requires you to be absent from classes for a whole week?” she asked, puzzled.

“I can't tell you that now.” I said, ignoring her a bit.

“What? But why?” Aditi asked, completely taken aback by my reply.

“It is an emergency, Aditi. Try to understand. I cannot tell you anything now. I will come back and explain everything to you. Just know that we won't be able to see each other for a week.” I said, a little agitatedly.

Aditi placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Neel, is something wrong? You have never talked to me in this manner. What is it?” She asked, concerned. I could also sense a feeling of hurt in her voice.

I cursed myself underneath for behaving this way with my princess.

“No, nothing important that you should know of. I will talk to you later, okay? Bye now.” I said, without looking at her. I knew she would have caught me if I let her look into my eyes.

I did not call Aditi that night, unlike our usual routine. Late into the night, my phone rang. It was Aditi. I did not pick up the phone.

Can't talk. Busy. Will see you in a week. Don't call or text till then. I texted her.

I kicked myself for being this rude to her. But it was for a greater good and I knew she would forgive me later.

You are acting strange. I am scared. Won't call if you wish so. Please take care. Bye. My phone beeped with Aditi's text reply.

My heart sank a little. I opened my phone's images and looked at Aditi's photo.

"I am sorry, baby. I know I am hurting you by behaving this way. But things will be fine soon. I love you." I spoke to her picture and kissed it.

For the next seven days, Aditi had no news about me. But I made sure I had every news about her through Adi. Adi told me she had asked him multiple times about me over the days but Adi was true to his promise to me. He did not tell her. She used to sit morosely in class, he told me. She walked straight back to her hostel after classes, without meeting any of her friends. She had become quiet and her face worried and serious.

"Just a few more days." I thought to myself, as I came back to my room one day. Every night, I looked at my phone and her picture in it. Only I knew how difficult it was for me to stop myself from dialling her number and whispering sweet nothings to her.

It was the seventh day, a day before the university was to be closed for the next four days at stretch. I did not attend classes. Instead, I sent a text to Aditi early in the morning asking her to meet me in our usual place right after classes and that I had something important to talk with her.

I was waiting for her on the park bench that evening. Aditi came in after her classes. Her face lit up when she saw me. Seeing my angel after a whole week surged up all the love that I had ever felt for her. She looked more beautiful than ever in a light pink kurta and blue jeans. She ran up to me and gave me a tight hug.

"Where have you been? I missed you so much." She said, her voice cracking. I pulled her away from me gently. She looked at me.

"How are you?" I asked, my voice grim and serious.

"What is wrong, Neel? Where have you been all these days and why are you talking to me in such a strange manner? Is everything all right? Please tell me." Aditi said. Her eyes were beginning to well up with tears now. I knew I had to tell her now or she would begin crying right there.

"I have something important to tell you." I said, my face still serious.

"What is it?" Aditi asked. Her voice had hints of fear and apprehension in it.

I held Aditi's hand.

"You will have to be strong, Aditi. Promise me you will." I said.

"Neel, please! What is it? Is everything all right? What has happened? I can't take it anymore. Please tell me." She said, by now her voice was giving up.

"I don't know how to tell you this, Aditi. But I guess I will have to." I looked straight into her eyes now. Big fat tears had formed over them and would drop anytime now.

"We are going to the hills!" I said, a crooked smile curving up on my lips.

Aditi stared at me without an expression.

“I... I don't understand.” She said.

I cupped my hands on her face and came closer.

“Baby! We are going to Mount Abu tomorrow. Pack your bags!” I said to her, smiling at her disbelieving face.

I took out an envelope from my pocket and handed it over to her. She stared at me for another few seconds and then tore open the envelope. Her eyes widened in shock as she saw the contents. It was a cheque.

“Twelve thousand rupees?” Aditi gasped at the amount.

“What... How? Where did you get this from? What is going on, Neel?” She asked.

“This is my first salary. And like I promised, I am going to share this with you and travel to the hills. Our pre-wedding honeymoon, remember?” I said, smiling at her.

“But... how? Did you earn this? And where had you gone?” She asked, still dazed by what I had just told her.

I held her hand and made her sit on the bench. Then I explained her everything.

“You know, that evening when you were telling me about your dream to travel to the hills? I had looked into your eyes and I had seen such a deep wish in them that I wanted to fulfil it, Aditi. I just could not see those sad eyes, those with an unfulfilled desire in them. Right then, I had made up my mind that I was going to take you to the mountains. Make you feel and experience your dream. The winding roads, the chilly cold air, the bonfire, the rains... all of it. And then when the notice about the four days' holiday came up, I decided this was the best time. And it is pre-monsoon, just as you love it. So I had asked Adi and Raju if they knew of any immediate part-time job vacancies around the city where I could take up work and earn enough money for the expenses. Raju told me about this chain of restaurants that had just opened up a new coffee shop near the new market area. And, they needed people for multiple works. Since the shop is newly set up, they needed strategists for publicity planning as well as people for physical work. They needed all of this just for a span of seven days because then they would transfer their own workforce in other cities to come and work here. They were looking for people to work for them temporarily. It was a miracle in disguise for me since I needed a job just long enough to earn the expenses. I immediately applied and they took me in. It was a small team and for the first two days, I was just supposed to run around doing errands to help set up the shop properly. I worked all round the day. And then on the night of the second day, the head and his team were sitting in a meeting where they were to zero in on a unique name for a new flavour of coffee that they were introducing. I just happened to be there as I was transferring some stuffs into the room. I was standing their listening to their conversation and then I don't know why or how but I suddenly suggested them a name. “MIRACLE”. The publicity head looked up at me and suddenly

got up and hugged me! They loved the name! He said it had the right amount of suspense and excitement that was needed to attract customers. And then, suddenly they said, I could work with them for the next few days as their publicity strategist since they needed a lot of other ideas for various things. And, then they offered to increase my salary to this whooping twelve thousand! There was no way I could refuse it. And, thus for the next five days, I used to sit with the whole team and we set up some really good ideas. Everyone was impressed with me! And, there I was! Holding a cheque of twelve grand at the end of the week!” I beamed as I finished my story.

“But... but why did you not talk to me? And, why did you behave so strangely with me previously?” Aditi asked.

“I wanted to give you a surprise, baby. I am sorry that I had to act this way but I did it just because I wanted to surprise you at the end. Adi told me about how tense you had become. I am so sorry. You have no idea how difficult these seven days were for me too. I used to talk to your picture on my phone, you know.”

I held her face. “But I did it all for you. We are going to the hills tomorrow!!!”

The tears finally left Aditi's eyes and trickled demurely down her cheeks.

“You did this all for me?” She said. Innocence was pouring through her eyes.

I smiled and wiped a tear from her face.

“I would bring the world at your feet, if you ever wish so, baby.” I said, looking into her eyes.

She put her arms around me and hugged me tightly. I brushed her hairs with my hand.

“You had scared me so much, you know. I thought I was losing you.” Aditi said, sniffing her tears away.

“You will never lose me, my dear. I will always be there. And, that's a promise.” I whispered into her ears.

“I love you so much.” She replied.

“I love you.” I said as pulled her away gently.

“Now, don't you have to pack your stuffs and all? We have a bus to catch tomorrow morning. Come on, now stop crying.” I said, smiling.

Aditi looked down shyly and brushed aside her hair.

“Okay.” She said, finally a smile curving up on her beautiful lips.

“That's like my baby. Come on, let's go.” I said, pulling her cheeks.

I walked Aditi back to her hostel.

“Will it be very cold up there? Do I have to pack warm clothes?” Aditi asked, as we

reached the gates of her hostel.

“You don't need to. My body temperature is quite warm so you won't have a problem, you know.” I winked at her.

“Shut up, you shameless person!” Aditi punched me playfully on my chest.

“Ouch! What? It is, after all, our honeymoon, remember?” I asked, my eyes rolling playfully. I loved teasing Aditi.

“Ok, bye! I have packing to do.” She said, turning away embarrassedly.

I laughed.

“Should I come to help?” I was enjoying myself.

“Thank you but I will manage. Go now. Don't you have packing to do?” Aditi asked, pushing me away.

“Okay, okay! I am going. I will call you at night, okay?” I said, blowing her a flying kiss.

Aditi smiled and turned inside the gates.

I waited for Aditi next morning outside her hostel. It had rained last night and the morning was cool and crisp. She came in dressed in an off white kurta and jeans, carrying a small trolley bag and a handbag.

We smiled at each other.

“All set madam?” I asked, smiling.

“Absolutely! All set!” Aditi replied, her excitement visible in her eyes. They were dancing with joy.

I had booked us Volvo tickets the other evening. We took an auto to the bus stand. Aditi was chirping all through the auto ride.

“We will build a bonfire every evening, okay?” She said, almost jumping on the seat. “And, we will watch the sun set behind the hills.”

I laughed as she began mentally noting down our entire itinerary.

“And, we shall go for long walks along the mountains everyday and feel the cool air on our faces and hair. Wow!! We can also go shopping for local Rajasthani souvenirs if we have money left, can't we?” She asked.

“Yes, princess, we will do everything that you want.” I smiled at her.

The bus started after everyone had settled down on their seats. Mount Abu is around five hundred kilometres from Jaipur and it takes a little over eight hours by road. So, I had booked an early morning bus so that we would reach Mount Abu by lunch time. It was seven in the morning when the bus left. Aditi turned to me and flashed a broad smile as soon as the bus started. I pulled her nose adoringly.

The bus zoomed through the highway. The conductor inserted a CD into the player and the mini television began playing a romantic Hindi movie. Aditi was a total Bollywood movie buff but today her eyes only wished to enjoy the road and the sky outside the window.

Soon, most of the people got bored of the movie. A young man who was sitting with his wife suggested the game of antakshari. Everyone excitedly agreed. And, thus began the mini bus picnic. Mostly, it was the men who were dedicating songs for their respective lady partners. The only interesting exception was when an old lady began a song for her husband. It was an old Mohammad Rafi number. Everyone clapped and cheered and sang along.

“Someday, we will grow old like them too.” Aditi said to me.

“And, we will still love each other with the same intensity. And, I will arrange another honeymoon trip for us on our golden jubilee anniversary, what say?” I said, excitedly to Aditi.

Aditi laughed away heartily.

“What? I am serious!” I said, eyeing her.

“All right! But we will come to Mount Abu only, promise?” She said.

“Why? Why not some other place?” I asked.

“Because Mount Abu is our first trip together, and so it will always be special to me. It will always remind me of your love for me and the things that you do for me. So, long after we have aged and grown old and maybe our memories would have started fading, I would like to come back to the same place with you to relive all the memories that we will create in the next three days.” Aditi said and smiled at me.

“Done! I promise you that we shall make a trip to Mount Abu on our fiftieth anniversary.” I said.

Our bus stopped at a petrol pump for a refill. We got down the bus to stretch ourselves. Aditi trotted about like a little child. The rains had washed the highway clean and the smell of wet earth still lingered in the air. Aditi inhaled the cool air around her. Her happiness was writ large on her beaming face. There was no greater happiness to me than seeing my love happy.

The bus drove on. Soon, we reached the Dudeswar Mahadev Temple. The bus stopped so that interested passengers could visit the temple. Most of us got down. The temple was a simple one without too much ornamentation. Inside the main area there was a statue of Lord Shiva and a shiva lingam in front of it. A big snake was carved out of stone and rested beside the lingam.

We left our shoes and sandals outside and went inside. Aditi and I stood beside each other and folded our hands in reverence before the mighty Lord Shiva. I prayed for

everyone who was close to me; my parents, Ranadeep and Aditi. I prayed for love and happiness in everyone's life.

I looked at Aditi beside me. A gentle smile played on her lips as she stood there, her hands folded in prayer. I stared at her beauty and thanked god for bringing her into my life.

Aditi opened her eyes and looked at me. She smiled as she caught me staring at her.

Those few days were the happiest days of my life. I was in heaven as I was in the cuddle of my love.

Chapter 11

I woke up to Ranadeep's voice in the morning, a week after my trip with Aditi.

“Good morning, birthday boy! Time to get up.” He said. I looked at Ranadeep through sleepy eyes. He was smiling at me. But it was not the smile that always brightened up his face. Ranadeep had changed a lot off late. He had ceased to be the jovial, fun loving, energetic man I had known from the beginning. Raju had told me he had started drinking a lot these days. He had begun spending his nights on the terrace, drinking alone to himself. Raju had to carry him to his room every night. There was only one thing on his mind and that was Ria. I hadn't told him about Ria yet. That she had confessed her love for me a few days back was still unknown to Ranadeep. I could not tell him and I would not.

Despite his own personal condition, he was here to wake me up on my birthday. He was aware that I would not be in my best mood today and would be missing Aditi's presence with me. So, he had come to make up for that and cheer me up. I did not know how to feel about Ranadeep. I felt guilty. I wished I could tell him the truth about Ria but I feared his reaction. I feared his condition would get worse and I felt worried about him.

“Thanks, brother.” I said and hugged him.

“Come on. Get up and get dressed. We have to go.” Ranadeep said.

“Ranadeep, yaar! I don't feel like going anywhere. Aditi isn't here and I don't feel like doing anything without her.” I told Ranadeep gloomily. I was missing Aditi terribly today.

“I am not taking you anywhere other than my home. Maa has prepared breakfast for you, birthday special, and all your favourite dishes.” Ranadeep said smilingly, but a faded smile.

My heart sank a little. Guilt was overcoming me once again. On one side, Ranadeep and his family treated me like one of their own and on the other side there was Ria, the girl Ranadeep was obsessed about, who had fallen for me. And, Ranadeep knew nothing about it. I felt helpless.

“Ranadeep, seriously, there was no need. Why did aunty bother herself uselessly?” I asked.

“I don't know. I got orders to bring you home and I am doing just that. Now, come on, get up, quick!” Ranadeep pulled me from the bed.

I knew I could not refuse aunty at any cost. She had taken pains to cook my favourite dishes on my special day and I could not disrespect her. I got up, showered and got dressed up. Raju was waiting for us outside the hostel gates.

“Happy birthday, Neel bhaiya!” Raju said, as we got in the car.

“Thank you, Raju!” I smiled at him. We drove off to Ranadeep's house.

Ranadeep's mother was delighted on seeing me. I went up and touched her feet. She hugged me, wished me a happy birthday and showered me with blessings.

“We know you are not very fond of gifts. So, I made up your favourite dishes for breakfast instead. You kids will get busy later in the day so breakfast was the only idea I could think of.” Mrs. Thakral smiled.

“Thank you, aunty. This is the best gift I could wish for. Thank you, so much.” I said, gratefully.

“Come, sit down.” She motioned towards the table.

“So, what are the plans, birthday boy?” Aunty asked, as she passed around the tray of sweets.

“Nothing, aunty. I'll just probably visit a temple and that's it.” I said.

“Actually, Maa, our birthday boy is missing his girl today. I told you about Aditi, remember? Aditi has gone home to see her ill grandmother and our man here is unable to enjoy his day without her.” Ranadeep quipped.

“But aren't you throwing a party for Neel in the evening? You told me yesterday that you are.” Ranadeep's mom asked.

Ranadeep slapped his forehead. I looked at him, puzzled. He made a face and looked at his mother with a dramatic scorn.

Aunty gasped and cupped her hands to her mouth.

“I am so sorry!! Was it a surprise, beta?” She looked apologetically at Ranadeep.

“Yes, my dear mother, it was supposed to be. But it no longer is. Maa...aa!!” Ranadeep whined.

I looked from Ranadeep to his mother.

“What are you looking at me like that for? I thought I'd throw a surprise party for you on your special day to make up for Aditi's absence. I thought that would cheer you up. But now that it is no longer a surprise, thanks to my mother India here, you are invited to your own birthday celebration in the evening at my farmhouse.” Ranadeep said.

I was at a loss of words. Ranadeep had put his own grief and heartbreak aside to make my day special. Even in his worst emotional time, he had thought about me. This is what real friendship is. Isn't it?

“Ranadeep, you didn't...” I began but was cut in mid sentence.

“You don't have a say on this. Your entire class has already been invited and all the arrangements made. Raju will pick you up from the hostel in the evening.” He told his last verdict.

I didn't say anything further. We finished our breakfast and I thanked aunty for all the love. She blessed me and wished for my good health.

Ranadeep came with me to the hostel.

“Go and have a good sleep because it's going to be a long party tonight.” Ranadeep said, as I got down from the car.

I nodded and thanked him. I couldn't even feign excitement.

Later in the day, I went to the temple behind our campus. My hands folded in reverence, I prayed for my family. I prayed for Aditi and lastly I prayed for Ranadeep. I prayed to god to return his cheerfulness, to fulfil his desires and to give him Ria's love.

Coming back to my room, I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. I thought of Ranadeep and Ria. I thought about the irony life was playing on my friend and brother. I thought about Aditi, my love. I missed her terribly. I hadn't been able to talk to her ever since she had gone back home. She couldn't call or receive my calls there. I took out my cell and re-read her text.

Hi love. Many, many happy returns of the day, baby. I am sorry I couldn't be with you today and I miss you so much. I promise to come back soon and then we'll celebrate your birthday in a special way. I love you. Stay blessed and take care. Hugs and kisses.

I wished she was here right now so that I could hug her and kiss her.

I spent the rest of the day mostly lying on my bed.

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Raju came to pick me up in the evening. We drove to Ranadeep's farmhouse. As I entered the dark hall, a birthday cracker burst off and the lights came on. I saw my entire class gathered in the hall, clapping and singing “Happy Birthday” to me. I smiled and thanked all of them. Ranadeep walked up to me and hugged me.

“Happy birthday, once again, my brother! May god bless you.” He said.

“Thank you, Ranadeep. And, thanks for all this.” I smiled. I looked around the hall and suddenly spotted Ria at one corner of it. She looked at me and smiled. Thinking that she had gotten over the phase, I smiled back at her.

Ranadeep had arranged a huge cake for me. As I blew out the candles and fed him the first piece of cake, I reflected on how important a part of my life Ranadeep was.

The hall soon became a discotheque as the DJ began to churn out his songs and red and blue party lights bobbed across the dark hall.

Everyone was drinking and dancing. Till then, everything was fine. I was in my senses and enjoying the party. But after an hour or so I don't know what happened...

I slumped on the sofa. My head was churning. Things were moving before my eyes, I did

not understand why. The room moved about in circles. I tried to shake my head in order to see clearly. My head fell back on the sofa. I wanted to hold on to something, someone. “Ranadeep! Where are you buddy, I think I need help. Raju!! Where are you? Aditi?” I called out. But I didn't know whether words came out of my mouth or not. I think I was speaking in my head. I could hear voices near me. The laughter of women. I suddenly had the urge to pee. I got up to go but fell back into the sofa. My head was reeling. I did not like the way I felt. I wanted to feel normal but I couldn't. I pulled myself up again with force. “Stand straight, Neel! Stand straight. You can do this.” I told myself. My legs wobbled under me. I jerked my head again. Forcing my eyes to look straight, I started making my way towards the washroom. The room was still moving and I could not walk straight. My feet jerked to the left. I spread my hands to balance my feet. Someone suddenly held my back. I moved forward, supported by that person. At the door of the washroom, the support withdrew.

“Go, Neel.” I heard the voice say. It was a woman's. I walked inside and unzipped my trousers. Things moved before my eyes as I relieved myself. As I came out of the washroom, I shook my head again to ward off the feeling. The next moment I fell to the floor with a thud. My head hurt and I couldn't see properly. I heard hurried movement near me.

“Neel!! Neel, get up. Come on, get up, and let's go.” The same voice was saying. I fluttered my eyes. Nothing was clear. I felt weird.

“Aditi!! Aditi, is that you? You came back for me?” I muttered.

“Yes, Neel. I am here. I have come back to get you. Come on, I'll take you to your room. Get up, hold onto me. Let's go.” Aditi said.

She lifted my arms and put it around her shoulders. She then held me at my waist and lifted me off the floor. I stood up, supported by her. My legs still wobbled under me.

“Aditi, my love! I missed you!! Where had you been? What took you so long, baby?” I muttered to her.

“I am sorry! But I am here with you now. I shall never leave you alone again, I promise. Come on, let's go to your room, okay?” she said, brushing her hands on my face.

“I am not feeling well. What should I do? What is happening to me?” I asked. I felt tired.

“You will be all right, Neel. I promise you that. You are just drunk, nothing else. Just be with me, all right?” She whispered.

We passed the hall once again. I could see people moving about in rhythmic steps. Music played in full volume. Lights danced before my eyes.

Aditi carried me into one of the rooms and laid me on the bed. She then closed the door behind her. She came and sat beside me on the bed and stroked my hair.

I looked at the ceiling overhead and back at Aditi. They all seemed to be moving in

circles. I felt heavy and tired. My head hurt from the heaviness. I looked at her again. She looked different but beautiful. Her eyes were smudged with kohl and her lips a fiery red. She looked gorgeous.

“I missed you so much, Aditi. I love you.” I said to her, brushing her open hair from her face.

She leaned closer to me and put her hand over my face.

“I love you too. I love you more than anything else in this world, Neel.” She whispered and brought her lips to mine. Her perfume tantalized me. I kissed her and she kissed me back. The heat of passion surged up in our bodies. She crossed her legs on both sides of my body and kissed me all over my face. Our lip lock grew more passionate with each passing moment. She then began opening my shirt buttons and unzipped my trousers. She put her hands inside. Overcome by the heat of the moment, I clutched at her arms and turned her down on the bed. I pulled open her top. I looked at her semi naked body and then took my hands behind her to unhook her bra. She lay on top of me now, kissing me.

“I love you, Aditi. I just love you.” I whispered into her ears. I let my hands run around her bare body, feeling each curve and crest of her beauty. We kissed each other all over and let our love flow freely into the night. We heaved and sighed as our bodies pressed against each other. I felt her nails dig into my skin, stroking me... scratching me and tempting me to move ahead. I was not able to control my libido. I was getting uncontrollable... And, then we made love into the night. Aditi moaned as I started getting inside her. Our breaths grew heavy and clouded as I ventured deep into her.

“I love you, Neel! You are only mine.” I heard her say as I finally drifted off to sleep.

Sunlight filtered in from the netted curtain, warming up my face. I opened my eyes and rubbed them. My head felt heavy, as if someone was driving a nail in there with a hammer. I pressed my hands onto my temples to keep the pain away and got up. I didn't remember where I was. I looked at the window and then slowly things started coming back to me. I remembered Aditi, she was there with me. I remembered how we kissed and I remembered the way we made love. I turned my head to where she was sleeping. Her back was towards my side. I leaned across to her. As I put my face across hers to plant a kiss on her cheeks, I stopped short. Something heavy landed on my heart and it stopped beating. Sleeping beside me, with a sheet covering her naked body, I didn't see Aditi but Ria Chopra! My lungs stopped taking in air as I stared at her in shock. I did not believe my eyes. I turned my head away and gulped down a glass of water from the table beside the bed. I put my hand on my head and closed my eyes. Images from the previous night began to replay in my memory. Ria was handing me a drink. Despite my refusal, she forced me into a drink. I was completely drunk. It was Ria who had helped carry me from the washroom. In my state, I had mistaken her for Aditi and she had not denied. My eyes opened in horror as I realized the things that happened after that.

Does that mean, Ria and I...? Oh Shit! Did she deliberately make me drink so that we

could...? No...No... it can't happen...oh my god!! What do I do now? What if Aditi comes to know of this? What if Ranadeep... Ranadeep. Where is he? Is he here in the farmhouse now? Shit!! Shit!!

I panicked as thousands of thoughts ran through my mind. I checked my cell. It had an unread text from Ranadeep. I opened it.

I am taking Ranadeep bhaiya home. He is totally drunk and not in his senses. – Raju.

The text read “sent at 11:45 pm”. This was before I got completely drunk myself. So Ranadeep had been taken home. He was not here now and he was not aware of anything that had happened between Ria and me.

I quickly got up from the bed and dressed. I walked into the washroom and splashed water on my face. I looked at my face in the mirror. My eyes were red and swollen. My hair was all dishevelled. Puffy bags had formed under my eyes. I craned my neck and stared at the mirror in horror. A red patch mark gaped at me from right below my ear. I dropped down on the floor and clenched my hairs. What had I done?! How could I have lost my senses to this level?! How could I have mistaken Ria for Aditi?!

I stood up and stared at myself in the mirror. Guilt filled eyes stared back at me. I did not know what to do. I did not know how I would face Ranadeep and Aditi now. I tried to calm myself down. I took a deep breath and splashed more water on my face. I wiped my face with a towel and came out of the washroom. Ria was still fast asleep on the bed. Her clothes were strewn about on the floor below. I took a glance at her and stormed out of the room.

The hall was still and silent. Some people were fast asleep on the couches. A couple of them were lying on the floor and snoring. Bottles and glasses were scattered around on the floor and on the tables. Everything around was completely silent. The silence seemed to be screaming at me. I took a look around the hall and walked off hastily outside.

The morning sun pierced into my eyes as I came out into the open courtyard. I raised my hands to shield my eyes. My head was still throbbing hard. I wanted to run away from the place as fast as I could. I walked out of the gates and into the street. My legs felt heavy and tired as I dragged them across the street. Images from the previous night flashed before my eyes. A lump began forming in my throat. I wanted to cry and I wanted to scream aloud but I could do neither. I was feeling like I had committed a sin. I wanted to call Aditi and tell her everything but then I was scared. Millions of things were drumming past my mind. Everything seemed to be like a nightmare to me. I did not know what to do or where to go.

An auto honked behind me. It broke into my delirium.

“Where to, sir?” The auto driver slowed down his auto beside me.

“Huh...ah?” I asked.

“Where do you wish to go? You need an auto?” The man asked, looking at me in a

strange manner.

“Boys... boys' hostel, University of Jaipur.” I stammered absentmindedly.

“Hundred bucks.” Announced the auto driver, blatantly.

He was asking double the general fare that we usually paid. But I did not seem to understand or grasp it at that point of time. I did not care. I threw myself inside the auto and fell back into the seat.

I glanced at the side mirror of the auto. I saw Ranadeep's face staring down at me. Startled, I spun around.

“What happened, sir?” The driver asked. “Are you all right?”

I turned back. The image was gone.

“Sir, are you okay? You seem disturbed and sick.” The driver spoke.

“No...No... I mean yes...yes... I am okay.” I said but my eyes were revealing something else. “Drive fast, can you please?” I asked the auto driver.

“I am driving. This is the maximum I can drive at. Now, this is not an airplane and I am not a pilot, am I?” The man said and gave a slight laugh as if he found his joke funny.

I did not say anything and looked outside on the road.

The auto dropped me outside my hostel. I paid the man and he drove off.

I walked inside and smashed into my room. I threw myself on my bed and closed my eyes.

I had begun thinking that there was another girl in your life.

Aditi's words boomed into my ears.

You trust me, don't you? I had asked her that day.

Then know that I cannot and will not ever break your trust, baby. No matter what. No one, absolutely no one can ever take your place in my heart.

These had been my exact words to her. And, what had I now done? Betrayed the very person I loved? Betrayed the person I called my best friend and brother?

I took out my cell and dialled Aditi's number. Just as I pressed the call button, I immediately disconnected and threw the phone on the bed. Aditi wouldn't pick up my call because she was at home. Moreover, I could not explain to her the entire incident and the situation under which everything happened over the phone. I had to wait for her to return. I would have to explain everything to her in person.

My thoughts crossed over to Ranadeep. I could not afford to tell him about last night. I could never imagine how he would react. I just could not bring myself to even imagine what would ensue if Ranadeep came to know about this.

I squeezed my eyes shut as bizarre thoughts hammered into my mind. I pressed my temples with my fingers as the throbbing continued. I grabbed my pillow and pressed it above my eyes. I fell asleep after a while.

When I woke up, it was already past noon. I checked my cell. It said I had three missed calls from Adi and two from Ranadeep. I panicked. Had Ria told Ranadeep about yesterday? She wouldn't, would she? Why would she do that? She doesn't even talk to him.

I postponed calling back Ranadeep for some time. I called up Adi.

“Dude! Where are you? I have been calling you since the morning.” Adi shouted on the phone.

“Umm... sorry, Adi. I overslept a little. I had had a bad headache after yesterday's party. I woke up just a few minutes ago.” I told him.

“Are you still at the farmhouse? I had left early yesterday. I could not find you while I was leaving.” Adi asked.

“No, I am back in my room. I came back in the morning.” I said.

“Oh, great! Let's go and have lunch outside then.” Adi suggested.

“Okay, where are you by the way?” I asked.

“I am out for some work. Let's meet up somewhere for lunch. The café behind the campus would be great. We haven't gone there for a long time” Adi said.

“Yeah, okay.” I said. “I'll meet you in about an hour then.”

“Great!” Adi said and disconnected.

I tried to drive away the thoughts that were constantly buzzing through my head. I got up from the bed and freshened up. I decided I would not call Ranadeep unless I had told Adi everything. I needed to tell this to someone and at the present moment, Adi was the only one who would be an unbiased listener to me. Only then I could think of sharing it with anyone else.

I met Adi at the café an hour later.

“What's wrong?” Adi asked, as soon as I sat down at our table.

“What?” I asked.

“Something is wrong. It's written on your face. You are tensed.” Adi deciphered, looking at me keenly.

My face contracted as panic began to strike me again.

“Everything is wrong, Adi. I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go.” I said.

“What happened?” Adi asked, surprised.

I stopped as the waiter brought in our plates. I leaned towards Adi and covered my face with my hands.

“I committed a blunder, Adi. Yesterday in the party, Ria and a few of her friends forced me to drink and then I don't know how...” my words trailed off as I wiped away sweat from my face.

“Then what, Neel?” Adi asked.

I told Adi everything that had happened last night while I was drunk. I explained to him how Ria had deliberately gotten me drunk and then had carried me into the room from the washroom. I told him how she acted like she was Aditi and not Ria. I explained how in my semi-conscious state, I had mistaken her for Aditi. And, then I narrated the incident thereafter and how I realized everything when I woke up this morning. Adi's face turned white.

“But... But... why would Ria do something like that with you?” Adi asked, his face totally nonplussed.

I moved my fingers around the plate.

“Because she is in love with me.” I said.

“What?” Adi asked, staring at me.

“It was quite some time back; prior to our second assignment tests. You remember I had decided to help Ria prepare for the tests? I had done so in order to become friends with her and then tell her about Ranadeep when the time was right.” I reminded Adi.

“What had happened that time?” Adi asked.

“We had become very close friends back then. My perception of Ria had completely changed. She was not the haughty, rich brat that I had assumed her to be. She was actually really sweet and nice and childlike. So, our friendship had grown in a short period of time. We had begun to spend time after our study time too. Once I had beaten up a couple of eve teasers who were troubling her on the street.” I continued.

“Then?”

“Then, I didn't know when how had Ria started to mistake all this friendly closeness between us as something beyond friendship. She started feeling that I love her and hence was delivering such gestures towards her. And then, one day, after the test results were out and we had gone out to celebrate her success, she proposed to me.” I said.

“What?” Adi's mouth fell open. “Ria Chopra proposed to you?”

“Hmm... she did not know about Aditi and me till then because we had not told anyone.” I said.

“So, what did you then say to her?” Adi asked.

“What would I say? I, of course told her that I was committed to Aditi and that Aditi was the only girl in my life. I explained her politely that she had misread our friendship and that I had never considered her beyond a good friend.” I replied.

“Then?” Adi asked.

“She totally flared up on hearing this. She began screaming and insulting Aditi. She said I could not reject her for a middle class girl and that no one has ever rejected Ria Chopra. I obviously could not stand there and listen to her insulting Aditi. I told her that sternly. Then she said something like Ria Chopra never accepts defeat and she will take me away at any cost. And, she had stormed off.” I said, finishing the story.

Adi was silent. He rubbed his hands through his hair.

“What happened after that?” He finally asked.

“Nothing. That was the last time we spoke until yesterday. I had not taken her seriously then, Adi. And, that is the only reason I had not told either Aditi or Ranadeep about that incident. When we had stopped talking to each other, I assumed things had settled back into place and that she had forgotten all about it. I did not know that she would stoop down to this level. Regardless of everything that had happened that day, I had still considered Ria as a friend. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that she would go to this level. What should I do now, Adi? What should I do?” I said, clutching my hair.

“Has she called you after last night? Does anyone else know about this?” Adi asked.

“No, she hasn't. I had left the farmhouse immediately after I discovered her beside me in the morning. And, Raju had carried Ranadeep away last night itself, before anything had happened. So, he is not aware of anything yet.” I said.

“Then, calm down, Neel. Do not panic. And, by no chance you can tell this to Ranadeep. You have already seen what he had done to himself. You don't want any extreme cases, do you? I suggest you explain everything to Aditi when she returns. I am sure she will understand. Other than that, I don't think you need to tell anyone about this.” Adi said.

“But... what if Ranadeep comes to know of it?” I asked.

“How will you if you don't tell him?” Adi tried to reason with me. “You just said that he had left the party way before, didn't you? Ria is obviously not going to tell him. So, that keeps you on the safe side. You cannot afford to tell Ranadeep about it, Neel. You don't know what he might do. Think about it, Neel.” Adi said.

I buried my face in my hands. Everything seemed like a bad dream to me. I wished I could just wake up and find that nothing had gone wrong in my life and that I had just been in a dream.

Adi placed his hand on my shoulders.

“You need to relax, mate. Nothing has yet gone out of our hands. We will think of

something. Come on, let's go now.” He said.

As we walked out of the café, I did not realize how mistaken Adi was. Everything had already gone out of my hands, as I would see later.

I called up Ranadeep in the evening.

“What the hell? Why have you been? Why didn't you call me back in the morning?” Ranadeep's voice boomed over the phone.

“Sorry, yaar, Ranadeep. I was way too tired after last night's party. I slept through the entire day.” I lied to him.

“You liked the party so much?” Ranadeep joked. I did not reply. A knot formed in my stomach and I felt heavy and sick.

“Ranadeep, bro... I'll call you back later, okay? I need to go to the library with Adi now.” I blurted out another lie.

“All right, nerd. Come home when you are free. I am tired of drinking alone. I need someone to sit beside me.” Ranadeep said.

“Yeah, I will see you, bye.” I said and disconnected.

I lay down on my bed and sighed. The urge to call Aditi was making me go mad now. I wanted to see her, to meet her and to tell her everything. But I knew it would be another four days before I could get to see her.

On a sudden thought, I wanted to call up Ria and confront her. She had betrayed my friendship by stooping down to such a low level and I wanted to ask her how she could have done such a thing. But I let go of the idea. I did not feel like talking to Ria at this moment.

I called up Adi and we went out for the evening. I did not return to the hostel till late into the night. I fell back on my bed and fell asleep immediately.

... I Love you Rachu ...

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

I think see knows my name

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Chapter 12

When I got up the next morning, the first thought that struck my mind was that I had to face Ria in the class today. We hadn't spoken to each other for over two months until the night before last when she used me to her advantage. Millions of thoughts barged through my mind as I lay awake on my bed. I wanted to just go and scream at her, to tell her how she had lost all my respect.

I looked at the clock beside my bed and got up to dress for classes.

Ria was sitting on the second last bench. As I entered into the class with Adi, my eyes fell on her. She looked at me and gave an innocent smile. I felt all the blood in my body boiling with raw fury. I glared at her. Adi placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Sit.” He said.

I could not concentrate on anything that was happening on the board. Rage was gripping me all over as I recalled the night's incidents. All I wanted to do was spring up from my bench and slap Ria. I did not care about any chivalrous etiquette now.

During recess, Adi took me to the canteen so that I did not have to see Ria's face.

“But I need to confront her, Adi!” I argued. “I cannot let her go like this.”

“And, what do you plan to say to her? That she slept with you forcibly? You think she will accept it? Think practically, Neel. She has done what she wanted to do. And, she will never accept that she forced you into it. You were a part of it too.” Adi reasoned with me.

I banged my fist on the table as I realized my predicament. Adi asked me to calm down.

Just then, Ria walked into the canteen with her friends in tow. I stared at her in a repulsive manner. She smiled as she walked towards me.

“Hi, Neel.” Ria said, sweetness dripping from her voice.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Oh, you already know what I want, don't you? I don't think I need to remind you anything. By the way, how are you feeling? You did enjoy the party, didn't you? It must have been your best birthday till date.” Ria said, smiling at me.

“Go away, Ria. Before you begin to regret that you came to talk to me here, go away.” I was speaking as calmly as I could force myself to behave. I did not wish to create a scene in a public place.

“Oh, But I haven't come here to just go away, you know. I have come here for something else.” Ria replied.

I had never before felt so much hatred in my life for anyone the way I now felt for Ria. I stared at her with rage filled eyes.

Ria then walked a little ahead and pulled a chair. She opened her heels and climbed on the chair. And then she took a step up and stood up on the table.

“Hey, everyone!” Ria called out loudly, clapping her hands to gather the attention of the people.

Everyone in the canteen stopped whatever they were doing and stared at Ria standing atop the table. Some people came in from the corridor to see what was going on. I saw some guys call up their friends to rush to the canteen.

I stared at Ria in horror and shock as she clapped her hands again.

“Can I have your attention, please?!” She announced. “Thank you!”

I could not believe what I was seeing. The worst of the worst thoughts passed through my mind. I looked at Adi beside me. He shook his head with the same shocked expression.

“You guys must be wondering what is this girl doing standing on a canteen table. Some of you might be thinking that I was mad. Well, guess what? I am mad!” Ria smiled. “Madly in love.”

The people around exchanged puzzled glances with each other and whispered amongst themselves. By now a considerably big crowd had gathered in the canteen.

“Yes, you heard it right, guys! Ria Chopra is in love. Finally!!” Ria laughed as she continued.

“That one girl that every guy in and around the university wants to fall in love with, the girl who is the heart throb of countless guys like you and the girl who is often accused of stealing away the hearts of a million men; alas! The same girl has lost her heart to someone.” Ria's voice reverberated through the canteen. I stood there in stunned silence.

“And, that lucky man is here amongst us, right now, people! Yes! He belongs to our college. He has managed to do something that no other guy could ever do. He made me fall for him madly. Ria Chopra is in love, everyone! A thing which I myself had never thought I would experience. I had always looked down upon the guys who came to propose me. They were always the same, you know - impressed by my looks and attitude. No one did ever try to look beyond my face or my body, into my heart. But this guy is different. He was there with me when I needed him the most and he told me that I was an amazing person, not just in my looks but also in my heart. But you know what, guys? He is a bit shy. He doesn't seem to realize that he loves me too. Until two nights back.” Ria stopped to take a breath. She smiled as she continued.

“Two nights back, he proved to me how strong our love for each other is. And, because I love him so much, I decided to propose to him and declare our love for each other in

front of all of you. There is nothing to hide in love. I believe in loving and confessing your love openly. So, right here, I am going to propose to the amazing man who is my love and my life. I cannot live without him. I am sure you all are eager to know the name.” Ria said and climbed down the table.

Ria put back her sandals and smiled at the crowd. She then walked over to where I was standing. The crowd waited with bated breath.

Ria stood before me and then turned towards the crowd once again.

“His name, ladies and gentlemen, is.... NEEL GUPTA!” Ria declared. The people let out a collective gasp of surprise and shock. Ria turned towards me.

“I love you, Neel. I love you more than my life. And, I know you love me too. But today, I wish to hear those three magical words from your mouth.” Ria beamed at me.

I looked round me. The entire canteen was staring at me in anticipation. This was beyond what I had expected. My entire body heated up in anger. Ria had crossed her limits before and now she had made a public mockery of me. I could not just sit and watch this happening. I clenched my fists in rage.

I walked a few steps towards her and slapped hard on her face. Everyone was stunned. It all happened in a fraction of second before anyone could understand anything. “You are unbelievable, Ria Chopra. You are such a bitch!” I shouted. I saw Ria's face change its colour. She was in tears now.

“I had considered you as a friend but you are nothing better than a rich spoilt brat. I was mistaken when I said that you were an amazing girl because I have never in my life met anyone as lowly as you are. You can stoop down to any level to get what you want. I am ashamed of you and more than that I am ashamed of myself that I ever considered you as a friend. You can be no one's friend, let alone be someone's love. Because you are a rich, filthy creature who can just think about her own selfish desires. You can never know what friendship means because it means accepting a friend's happiness. But all you can always see is your own happiness. You are a dirty woman, and I feel sorry for my friend, Ranadeep, that he still feels madly for you. You don't deserve to have anyone's love because you don't know what love means. I regret the time that I ever spent with you. You have a filthy, dirty heart, Ria, that does not know love. You are blinded by desire and you think just because you are a rich daughter of a rich dad, you can get anything you want?” I mocked.

“But guess what, Ria Chopra?! You are mistaken. You said Aditi was a middle class girl, didn't you? Well she is richer than you because she has her friends with her and more than that she has me. I have told you before and I am telling you now. I do not love you! I do not love any other girl except my Aditi and I am happy because she is an angel unlike you, Ria. She knows to keep me happy, she is selfless and caring. You are nothing beyond a selfish, haughty, egoistic rich spoilt brat. And, I will never forgive you for what you have done to me. You betrayed my trust and my friendship. You don't even

deserve to be respected, let alone be loved. I hate you, Ria. I hate you more than I have ever hated any person in the world. And before I do something drastic to you, leave this place and my life forever. Get lost!" I screamed at her.

"And as for you people," I looked around me." The show is over! I am sure you have better things to do in your life." I said and stormed off the canteen.

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I was glad and relieved that Aditi was coming back the next evening. I could not wait any longer to see her and tell her everything that had happened with me in her absence. Just another twenty four hours and I would be with her, I thought. After whatever happened in the day, I told Adi I was going to tell Ranadeep everything from the beginning. I could not keep this from him any longer. He deserved to know the true face of the girl he had been obsessing about. I wanted to tell him how she had trapped me and taken advantage of my drunken condition that night. Ranadeep had to know that Ria did not deserve him and that he had been ruining his life for a girl who did not deserve even a bit of his love.

I lay there on my bed staring at the ceiling. I looked at my phone and decided to call up Ranadeep. I dialled his number.

The phone gave three full rings and disconnected. I called up Raju's number.

"Hello?" Raju's voice spoke through the phone.

"Hello, Raju? Where is Ranadeep? He isn't picking up his call." I said.

"He's fast asleep, Neel bhaiya. He came home in the evening and he was completely drunk. He just fell on his bed and went off to sleep." Raju informed me.

"Oh!" I said.

"What happened, Neel bhaiya? Did you have some urgent work?" Raju enquired of me.

"No...no... just like that, okay, I will talk to him tomorrow then, I guess." I said.

"Okay, Neel bhaiya." Raju said. I disconnected the call and slammed the phone on the bed.

Just this particular night; and things will be all right from tomorrow, I assured myself. My life had taken a curious turn since the last few days. I will set everything straight tomorrow and life will return to normalcy, I said to myself. I did not know how wrong I was until the next morning.

My phone was buzzing beside me. The vibration was driving me crazy. I was in the middle of a dream. The phone kept on buzzing. I moved my hand about the bed irritatingly, looking for the phone. I opened my eyes sleepily. It was seven in the morning and Adi was calling. What the hell was wrong with him, I cursed him under my breath.

"What?" I picked up the phone and grumbled sleepily. "What is it so early in the

morning, Adi?"

"Neel, Wake up!!" Adi spoke. His voice was tense and urgent. "There is an emergency. You have to come to the college immediately."

"What is it, Adi?" I asked, still in my sleepy voice.

"Neel, wake up for god's sake!! Ria has hurt herself. Please come immediately." Adi said.

"Wha... What?" I sprang up. "What do you mean she has hurt herself?" I asked.

"There is no time to explain over the phone, Neel. Just come to girls' hostel complex right now." Adi said and the phone clicked.

"Hel... hello? Adi?" I said. But Adi had disconnected already.

I got up from the bed and put on a shirt and jeans. I ran downstairs. All kinds of things began running through my mind.

Ria has hurt herself.

Adi's voice rang constantly in my ears. Oh! What did the girl do now? Oh god! Please let everything be safe and under control.

I ran down the stairs and out the hostel gates. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me. Adi's call rang up on my phone again.

"On my way, I am on my way." I said, panting.

I reached the campus building huffing and out of breath. As I slowed down and bent a little to catch my breath, I saw before me a huge circle of people. Some people were running back, speaking urgently on the phone. I could not see anything beyond the crowd of people. My heart beat paced up furiously as I made my way into the crowd. I pushed through the crowd.

As I saw the scene before my eyes, all the blood drained from my body. My head began to reel and for a moment darkness engulfed me. The ground beneath my feet seemed to give away.

Ria lay there on the ground before me. Her head like an island in a pool of blood. Her hair was open and the bottom of it drenched with her own blood that flowed like a river from her skull.

My entire body suddenly turned cold as ice. I stood there staring at Ria's corpse before me. My mind was blank. Everything around me silent and still.

"Neel!" someone touched me on my shoulder. I turned around in daze. Adi was standing before me.

"Adi... Wha... What?!" I stammered.

“Come on, let's go!” Adi held my arm and said.

“But... but... Ria...how..?!” I tried to speak.

“Let's go, Neel. It isn't safe for you here.” Adi pulled me and dragged me away from the crowd.

I followed him blindly. I was unable to understand what was going on. Adi lead me to a deserted area away from the crowd.

“Adi, what... what happened? Ria... How... what happened?” I was short of words.

“She jumped off from the terrace of the hostel building. Around fifteen minutes before I called you. Death on spot.” Adi said, his face pale and scared.

I collapsed to the ground and cupped my mouth with my hands.

“There is another serious problem, Neel.” Adi said.

I looked up at him.

“Ria has left a suicide note behind. They found it in her purse on the terrace. On the note, she has written that you betrayed her and cheated on her. She has mentioned that you both were together and that you had promised to love her forever. She also wrote that you had slept with her on the night of your birthday but then had cheated on her later. She wrote that she loved you and did not wish to live a life which did not have you in it.” Adi said.

I did not know how to react. My entire world seemed to have come crashing down all of a sudden. I thought of Aditi and how I had intended to tell her everything today. And then I thought of Ranadeep and a chill ran down my spine.

“Rana... Ranadeep.. Where is he?” I asked Adi.

“I don't know. He hasn't been informed yet, I think.” Adi said.

“I... I have to call him. I have to call him right now.” I stammered and fumbled for my phone in my pocket.

Adi held me and shook me.

“Neel! What are you doing? You want to call Ranadeep? And, what will you say to him? That the girl he loved has killed herself over you? Have you lost your bloody mind?” Adi asked.

“But...he... he needs to know... he needs to know the truth, Adi!” I said.

“And, why do you think he will believe the truth when the suicide note says something completely opposite? Are you even thinking what you are saying? Ria was Ranadeep's obsession, Neel!! Can you even imagine how he would react when he comes to know about this, dammit?!” Adi almost raised his voice.

“What do I do... what should I do now?” I said, half to myself.

“Neel! Neel, here, look at me! Look at me!” Adi said. I raised up my head.

“Listen, Neel. The police will be here any minute. They have evidence against you. If they find you here, you are straight away going to the lock up. Listen to me. Just go away from here now. Run away somewhere. Do not be seen anywhere around the vicinity.” Adi said.

“But...” I tried to speak but nothing came out, as something was blocking my throat.

“There is no time for if's and but's, Neel! Think about it. Your life is in danger right now. And, you know you are innocent. Just keep away from here for a couple of days till things are settled a little. Are you getting me?” Adi pressed on.

“Aditi... Aditi is supposed to return today... I need to explain everything to her!” I said.

“I'll manage her. I will speak to her. You just cannot afford to stay here any longer, Neel. They will be after your life! Why are you not trying to understand?” Adi said.

“But where should I go? I don't know anyone beyond college here.” I asked.

Adi thought for a while.

“I have a friend who lives near the railway station. You could go and stay there in his house. I will tell him. He won't refuse. Stay there till things get a little calmed down over here.” He suggested.

Adi dialled a number and walked off to talk to his friend. He came back a minute later.

“It's done. I will take you to his place right now. Stay there until I ask you to come out. And, don't worry about Aditi. I'll take care of her. She is like my sister. Come on, let's hurry now. We don't have time.” Fear was evident in his eyes.

We came out of the campus and took an auto. It took us around twenty minutes to reach the place. Adi introduced me to his friend. His name was Rahul and he was actually a schoolmate of Adi's elder brother. He worked in some factory here.

“You can stay here as long as you want to.” Rahul said to me.

“Thanks a lot, buddy. We won't trouble you for long. I'll take Neel away as soon as things cool down around the campus.” Adi said.

“Absolutely no problem. Your friend is my friend too.” Rahul smiled.

Adi then took me to a corner.

“Do not pick anyone's call unless it's me, okay? And, please do not do anything in haste, Neel. You need to calm your nerves down. I'll keep informing you about whatever happens.” He explained.

I nodded.

“Adi?” I said.

“Yes?”

“Take care of Aditi, please. Don't let anything happen to her.” I requested.

“I promise.” Adi said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you.” I replied. Adi smiled.

“I should be going now. Take care, okay. I'll call you in the evening.” He said as he descended down the stairs.

I watched him get into an auto and drive away.

“Come on in.” Rahul said to me. I followed him inside his two room apartment.

I slumped down on the single chair in the living room.

“I'll get some water for you.” Rahul said. I gave him a grateful smile.

I gulped down the water. My throat had become dry and parched.

“You can rest in the other room. I'll prepare lunch. It's my off day today.” Rahul said.

“Thanks a lot, Rahul. I am grateful, really.” I said.

“Oh, come on! Please don't be formal now.” Rahul smiled.

I got up and walked to one of the two rooms in the apartment. It was a small room, barely occupied. It just had a bed and a table for furniture. I lay down on the bed and looked down at my phone. Aditi's image popped up on my wallpaper. My eyes welled up as I looked at her picture.

I do not know what is happening, baby. I do not know why it is happening with me. I did not want any of this to happen. I wanted to tell you everything before things went out of hand. But I don't know what is happening. I just cannot understand. And, I miss you terribly. I wish you were here with me right now. Everything would have been all right.

I spoke to Aditi's picture.

I closed my eyes and began rewinding everything that had happened with me in the past couple of days. I mused on how my life had suddenly taken this drastic turn in a matter of two days. Or maybe it had started way before and I had failed to notice it back then. I recalled how Ria had said that she would have me at any cost. The blood drenched image of Ria played before my eyes. I squeezed them shut to drive away the images. I knew they were going to haunt me every day now.

I love her, Neel. And, I want to get her at any cost.

Ranadeep had said to me. All those days that Ranadeep had spent locked up in his room came back to my memory. I remembered how he had looked when he had finally opened his door. I shivered when I remembered noticing his slit hand and blood painted confessions of love on his wall. I recalled his obsession for Ria and how he had taken to

drugs in her memory. The images kept on replaying over and over again in my head. I just could not drive them away. I twisted and turned on the bed. I knew I had to talk to Ranadeep and explain everything to him. Despite what Adi had said, I knew this was what I was supposed to do at the moment. I did not care what the entire university would think about me as long as my closest ones trusted me.

I dialled Ranadeep's number. It rang for a long time before he picked up.

“Where are you?” Ranadeep asked.

“Ranadeep, my brother, please. I need to talk to you and you have to listen to me.” I said.

“Where are you?” He repeated.

“I am not in the campus, brother and I cannot tell you where I am right now. The police are after me. I don't want to go to prison without being able to explain you the truth. Please, listen to me once. Things are not what they seem to be, Ranadeep. Believe me, please.” I pleaded.

“I believe you.” He said.

“Really?!” I asked and felt a little heaviness slip from my heart.

“Yes. But I want you to tell me the entire thing. I want to know the complete truth.” said Ranadeep.

“And, that's why I called you. I knew you would understand when you listen to the entire truth. I knew you would believe me, brother.” I said and thanked the almighty.

“No, Not over the phone. I want to meet you in person. Somewhere in seclusion, where the police wouldn't be looking for you. I want to be able to meet you alone.” Ranadeep spoke.

“Sure. Even I want that. Thank you so much, yaar. I knew you would listen to me once. I was certain about it. And, I will explain you everything. I promise.” I said.

“Meet me behind the fest grounds at six in the evening.” He said.

“I'll be there.” I said.

The phone clicked. I heaved a sigh of relief. This was the first sign of something good and favourable for me since the last two days. I knew Ranadeep would never judge me or take any decision against me without listening to my side. He was a brother to me and even though he was at an emotional loss, he had agreed to meet me. I looked up at the ceiling and thanked god for giving me such a friend.

I had lunch with Rahul and took a small nap after. I then waited for dusk to fall.

Chapter 13

It was late evening and the backyard of the ground was empty. The sky was beginning to get dark. Ranadeep was standing with his back to me. He was looking at the place where once the fashion show ramp stood. I saw his head turn a little on hearing my footsteps. But it immediately retracted back to its position. I walked over to him and stood there behind him. Neither of us spoke anything for what seemed to me a long time. The silence was deafening and it pierced through my heart. I had vowed to explain everything to Ranadeep today. I was certain that he would listen to me, to his brother. And, that is all I wanted from him. For I knew, he would believe me and understand if I explained him everything that actually happened. I knew he would understand that I was not responsible for what Ria did to herself. I wanted to tell him everything from the very beginning and I knew he would listen.

“Ranadeep.” I said, softly, placing my hand on his shoulder.

Ranadeep turned back. Our eyes locked. In his face, I could read a strange calmness, almost serene. But it was his eyes that I was looking straight into. In them I saw every expression that his face had veiled. His eyes were bloodshot. I saw fire brewing inside them, glistening with a layer of water that was now beginning to form at the corners. And, at that moment, I knew I was wrong. Ranadeep was not going to believe me. He was not going to believe the truth. I would not be able to make him understand. My heart sank within me as I realized the futility of this meeting.

“Ranadeep...please...listen to me...” I opened my mouth to speak.

The next moment, he landed a hard punch on my face. I staggered and fell to the ground due to the sheer force of it. A searing pain rose from my nose. I brought my hand to my face. Blood oozed out from my nose onto my hand. Before I could realize what had just occurred and stand up, he landed another kick on my stomach, this time with his shoes. Blood spat out from my mouth. I clutched my stomach in pain. I felt as if all the air was sucked up from my lungs. The very next moment, I was lying on the ground, flat on my stomach, as a result of another kick. I gasped for breath. I coughed out blood and saliva from my mouth. My teeth chewed on the sand as I tried to breathe in some air.

“I treated you as my brother.” Ranadeep finally spoke, his voice still calm. He turned me over with his foot and kicked my face with full force. He then held my collar and picked me up. Another hard punch on my face and I staggered back. Blood dripped from my face and on to my shirt.

“Ranadeep... I... I... didn't...” I tried to speak, raising my hand towards him.

He hit me on my chin with his fist. I fell back to the ground again, my nails dragging sand, dirt and blood. My chin had broken, I realized as I wiped off blood from there.

“I treated you as family, brought you home, gave you recognition, my mother prepared

food for you and fed you like her son. And, this is how you repaid me?" He kicked me on my waist. Tears were trickling out of his blood red eyes.

"You bastard!!" Ranadeep screamed, his voice piercing through the darkness.

"You betrayed me with the only girl I ever loved? You bloody rascal!!" He kicked me on my skull, making a fresh cut on my forehead. Blood trickled from the side of my head, making a pool of red on the sand. My ears buzzed with pain and my head throbbed. I was beginning to lose consciousness. Ranadeep came closer to me. His towering figure now loomed over my face. I could not keep my eyes fully open, my vision was blurring and I could feel Ranadeep's image swaying before my eyes.

"I... I... I swear... I didn't do any... anything..." I stammered, trying hard to breathe. "Kill...kill me if that...satisfies you...Rana... Ranadeep...but...but... I swear on my mother... on Aditi... I didn't do anything."

Ranadeep hit me on my face again.

"You killed my Ria... you took away my life. I can kill you right now if I wished to. But I will not. You took away my love and now I will make sure your love is snatched away from you. You took away my life... and now I will make your life a rotten hell. You will want to die each moment of your living but death shall not come to you as easily. I will make you meet death each single day of your living." Ranadeep shouted, as he landed a series of kicks on my stomach. I winced in pain.

I lay there on the ground, bloodied and in intense pain. Ranadeep walked away from me and stopped at a distance. I heard him scream Ria's name. He clenched his hair and screamed and howled into the night. Clouds of dust and smoke rose up into the air as he kicked the ground fiercely with his feet. And, then I heard his howls slowly give away to sobs. He sat down on the ground and cried. Minutes later, I was picked up by some policemen and carried into a jeep. My eyes drew to a close as I watched Ranadeep's image move farther away from me.

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It hurt me to open my eyes. I tried to force them open. I saw some people standing before me. They were saying something. I watched their lips move. My eyes closed again. Darkness.

I heard my name. Someone was calling out my name. The voice was very faint but it seemed familiar. I was unable to open my eyes. I had been dreaming and I wanted to wake up. I shook my head in order to force open my eyes. Ranadeep was strangling me. Aditi was moving away. I wanted to break free but I could not. I shook my head desperately trying to wake up. That faint voice kept on repeating my name. I burst open my eyes with full force. For a moment, all I could see was darkness. Little circular images began zooming in and out before me. Slowly, I began to see things. I moved my eyes around. I was lying on a hospital bed. Tubes ran in from my arms and nose.

Bandages covered my forehead and waist. I heard my name again. It was Adi, sitting on a stool beside my bed.

“Neel? Are you awake? Can you hear me?” He asked, softly.

I nodded my head gently. It hurt me to move.

“They have suspended you from the college. And, the police have an arrest warrant against you based on Ria's suicide note. They are going to arrest you.” He continued, slowly and softly.

I closed my eyes in helplessness again. I let Adi's words sink in.

“Neel? Neel? “Adi's voice spoke.

I opened my eyes slowly.

“I... I didn't do anything...” I said, softly. My mouth hurt when I spoke.

‘I believe you, Neel. I know you can never do such a thing. But Ranadeep won't understand. He has lost it completely. He has become worse than an animal now. Last night, he stormed into your room, he was completely drunk and he ravaged your room completely. He didn't spare anything, not even your roommate's things, broke every single thing in your room. He has got the entire law against you through his influences, maybe even the judiciary.” Adi told.

“But, Aditi... where is... she?” I asked him, trying to open my mouth as little as possible owing to the stitches.

Adi looked down at his feet and then back to me.

“She was here once when you were still unconscious. She's been crying the entire time. She told me to tell you that you betrayed her love and she can never forgive you for that.” Adi said, his eyes not meeting mine.

“Didn't... didn't you tell her?” I asked.

“I did, Neel. I swear I did. I tried my best to make her understand. But she would not listen to me. The entire college has been talking shit about you. They have not spared Aditi too. And, Aditi is very disturbed by everything around her. She is unable to accept the sudden change that has befallen her.” Adi said.

I looked away to the other side. A tear drop escaped from the corner of my eye and ran down my cheek. I winced as the salt pricked the wound on the corner of my lip.

I was discharged a couple of days later. My wounds had not healed completely, especially the internal ones - the wounds my fate had given on my heart and my soul. Some of the bandages still remained and I could not walk without limping. Adi had come to take me; two constables also accompanied him as there was an arrest warrant against me. We came to the hostel in an ambulance. As Adi helped me climb down the ambulance, I noticed other guys staring at me from their windows and balconies. I

limped in my steps and Adi supported me on my shoulders. I had to climb up the stairs and the pain was nerve wracking.

“Careful.” Adi said, softly.

I had to take one step at a time and walk very slowly. Every jerk on my legs inflicted a searing pain through my entire body.

When we reached my room, I noticed the other side was vacant. Most of my things had been destroyed. The bedsheets had been pulled off, the study table was empty and the cupboard was swung open with all its contents gone.

“He left the room. He applied for a room change and has gone on to stay somewhere on the top floor.” Adi said, looking at me.

I did not say anything and went inside. Adi helped me into the bed.

“I’ll pack your things.” He said.

I remained silent.

I had lost everything around me. It did not matter to me anymore whether I was in a lockup or outside it. I had failed to make Ranadeep see the truth. Aditi did not wish to see me. I closed my eyes and shut everything down.

Half an hour later, I climbed into the back of a police jeep and was carried away to the prison.

Chapter 14

It was like a dungeon; the prison where I was locked up in. Everything was dark and dingy. My eyes took time to acclimatize to the dimness that surrounded me. I was put up in a lock up that was more of a human cage. At least I was living a scene from the Hollywood movies; I tried to joke with myself. The lock up had an iron bench and nothing else. I was to stay here till until the trial was over. After that, I would be transferred to a bigger prison for it would be a long stay. I would, of course walk free if I was proved innocent in the trail but no one really thought about that chance because I did not even have a lawyer to represent me as my parents couldn't afford, while Ranadeep had the best one. A public prosecutor was taking up my case.

Adi came to visit me every day during the visiting hours. He kept on informing me about college, Aditi and Ranadeep. Ranadeep had invested a crazy amount of money to ensure that I never came out of the prison and that I would get the harshest punishment. I no longer cared.

“Adi, please! Do something. I need to see Aditi.” I said, when Adi came to visit me in the usual time one evening.

“I will speak to her once more. She does not come to college much nowadays, Neel. They don't behave properly with her. They talk behind her back about you and she does not like it. She has lost the few friends she had. I am the only one she talks to occasionally.” He said.

“Please, Adi. You are the only one I can turn to now. Please ask her to come and meet me once. Just once. For the sake of our love. Tell her I deserve to be heard at least once; for the sake of everything that we had ever shared. I can live with anything but not with the guilt that I betrayed her love and trust. I need to explain everything to her. Please Adi.” I pleaded.

“I'll bring her here tomorrow. I promise.” He said.

“Thank you.” I managed to smile at him.

P

He kept his promise. I hadn't seen Aditi for a very long time. She had left for her home two days before my birthday. It seemed like ages had passed since I had seen her last. Aditi walked in with Adi behind her. She was wearing a white salwar kameez and her hair was tied up in an unkempt mess. She looked unhappy and ill. The usual glow had drained from her face and her eyes had drooped. Dark patches had formed under her eyes. She came and stood before the vertical bars. We looked at each other.

“I'll wait outside.” Adi said and walked back, leaving the two of us alone.

“You haven't been sleeping properly.” I said to Aditi, looking at her eyes. Aditi looked down at her feet.

“How are you, baby?” I asked her.

“I am okay. How are you?” Aditi asked. Her voice was going to give away any minute.

“Oh, I couldn't ask for more!” I joked as I gave her my crooked smile.

Aditi tried to smile but all she managed was two big tears in her eyes and a bit of stretched lips.

I extended my hands through the bars and held hers. Her hands were shivering. She could not contain herself anymore and the tears finally made their way out of her eyes and onto her face.

I pressed her hands.

“I didn't do anything, Aditi. I swear on our love. You have to trust me.” I said to her softly.

“How could you expect me to trust you when every shred of evidence is against you, Neel? You betrayed our love, you toyed with my trust.” Aditi broke down.

“Aditi, please! Please don't cry. It is nothing like they are making it seem outside. You have got to believe me. I am innocent. I wanted to tell you everything that happened before Ria... But I could not call you. You have got to listen to me, Aditi. I can spend my entire life behind these bars but I cannot live without letting you know the entire truth. I just cannot live with you considering me as your culprit. You are my only weakness but biggest strength too.” I said.

Aditi looked straight into my eyes.

“Promise me you are going to tell me the truth.” She said.

“I promise you, baby. That is why I wanted to see you. I have never ever lied to you. I wanted to tell you everything long back but I couldn't reach you.” I said.

“I am listening.” Said Aditi.

Over the next ten minutes, I explained everything to her. Right from my closeness to Ria during the test preparation to her proposing me the first time, I told everything to Aditi word by word. I told her how Ria had threatened me that she would have me by any means. I then told her about my birthday party. I told her how much I had been missing her. I then explained to her everything that happened before and after Ria and her friends forced me to get drunk. I told her that I was drunk beyond consciousness and that Ria had set up this trap deliberately for me. I told Aditi about the incident in the washroom and how I had mistaken Ria for her. I explained her how Ria had used my semi conscious state to her undue and lowly advantage. I told her how badly I had wanted to call her the next morning but had to wait for her to return. And then, finally I described the incident in the canteen where Ria had created that scene and I had humiliated her in front of the whole crowd.

“This is the actual and entire truth, Aditi. I swear on you. Everything else that Ria had written on her note and every other thing that people have been saying is a complete lie. Trust me. Adi and you are the only two people I expect to trust me.” I said finally.

“So, you did sleep with Ria?” Aditi said, softly.

“I... I am sorry, Aditi. But, believe me; I did not do it consciously. I was not in my senses. It was your image that had been playing before my eyes and it was your name that I had constantly been calling out all through. Ria used that to her advantage. She pretended she was you all throughout, Aditi. I... I...” my words trailed off.

“You should not have gotten drunk.” Aditi said, her face and voice expressionless.

“I...I know that, Aditi. And, I am regretting that every single moment here and will regret it my entire life. But I did not drink, yaar. They forced me into it. How do I make you understand? I had been missing you terribly and I just fell into the trap. Please, trust me. It was not a conscious fault on my part. Please, Aditi...” I said, desperate and helpless.

Aditi looked at me.

“I should go now.” She said.

My heart sank. I looked at her helplessly.

“Aditi!” I said, softly. She looked up at me. “I love you and only you. I always have.” I said.

“Bye, Neel. Take care.” She said, turning.

“Aditi, listen!” I called out. She turned towards me.

“Come back tomorrow if you can, please. You are my only strength in these times.” I said.

Aditi did not say anything and turned back. I watched her walk away and turn around the corner. I sat down on the hard stoned floor of my cell and leaned against the wall.

Adi was there as usual in the evening the next day. Aditi did not come with him.

“The court has postponed your hearing for a week.” He said.

“As if an extra seven days is going to make any difference.” I smirked. “They could have as well finished with the hearing. At least, I would get to stay in a bigger shit hole than this.”

Adi kept quiet.

“Aditi did not come?” I asked.

“No, when I asked her if she wanted to come with me, she refused. She said she needed time.” Adi said.

“Hmm.” I hummed.

“Have you been eating? Do they give you proper food here?” Adi questioned.

“If a stone hard bread and watery tea fit the description of proper, then yes!” I said, smiling.

“The bastards!” Adi swore.

“How is college?” I asked.

“Not the same anymore, yaar. Everywhere everyone is only talking and spreading rumours. These assholes don't even know the story and start making up a new one every day. I feel like hitting the one who starts these rumours in the first place.” Adi said with clenched teeth.

“And, exactly how many will you hit, Adi?” I asked. He grew silent.

“You should better be going now. It's late.” I said after ten minutes.

“Hmm. Take care. I will come back tomorrow.” He said.

I spent the rest of the evening swapping places between the stone floor and the iron bench. It used to get cold as night fell. I was not given anything to wrap over me and the floor and bench used to get equally cold. So, I would lie down against the wall and curl up my hands and legs as close to my chest as I could. I did not have to wear the prison uniform as of now. That would be once I was transferred to the bigger jail. So, sometimes I would wrap my previous day's shirt over myself and sleep.

All of a sudden my eyes went over my watch. The time was 5:50 P.M. My time was about to get over and I was yet to know completely about Neel's life.

“Neel, we will have to wrap it for the day. The jailor may be coming anytime. He would again force us to leave in the middle of another part.

“Will you come back the next day?” asked Neel.

There was a sudden stillness in his voice. It felt as if he didn't want me to leave. The gleam in his eyes was gone. It seemed like he was not expecting the break to happen.

But, I had to accept it. We had to welcome it, either on our own, otherwise forcefully.

I will surely come back tomorrow. I am eager to know about you. I want you to be out of this mess. I wish to know all the possible ways to remove you from this hell.

“Thank you so much. I will be waiting for you.” Neel said.

I shook hands with Neel and left the jail.

“This is wrong. How can this happen to someone? Where is God? Why doesn't he

come and help Neel and Aditi? They are made for each other. 'Neel' and 'Aditi' shouldn't be the part of such a remorseful story." Questions were wondering in my mind, make me feel uneasy.

By now I was at the reception desk of the jail. I spotted the chief jailor over there and said to him "Sir, He didn't do anything wrong. He shouldn't be in the jail. He is a very genuine person. He hasn't done anything wrong."

"Mr. Rajiv, we just have to follow the decisions of the court. We are just doing our work."

"But Sir, you can do something to help Neel. He is innocent, he has not done anything. How can someone keep a person like him in jail?"

"Look Mr., whatever your name is..., please do not give me anymore advises. I know my job perfectly and I am doing it. Regarding Neel, the court does not make decisions out of someone's emotions. They ask for proof and your friend does not have any."

"The proof would be there, Sir. The only thing is that, our judiciary and the policemen are in the hands of some powerful nuts, who intend to rule their world by their money and power. Where were you when Ranadeep was hitting Neel like an animal and you people didn't arrest him? Does your law give you the permission to beat someone cruelly in front of everyone? Isn't this your duty?" Suddenly, in the flow of emotions I raised the pitch.

"Shut up and go out from here. Otherwise, it won't take a minute for me to put you behind the bars. Then, keep sitting with your friend and know his story daily. Just leave the place immediately." He exclaimed.

I was raged at his reply. But, I was helpless. So, I chose to leave immediately. But, I was sad to know the law and order in the nation. A law where a criminal is outside and an innocent person is in the prison. A law which has convicted an innocent person. A law which has kept the two most beautiful lovers of all time away from each other.

"This shouldn't happen at all. This story can't end up here. This is wrong." I thought to myself. I was agitated, firstly, because of the system of India, where Neel and Aditi are away from each other and secondly, because of the uncivilized inspector, who didn't knew how to help people.

Back home, I was with my wife. That day she was angry with me. Firstly, because I had left home without telling her. Secondly, I didn't take her out on Sunday. But, when I told her about Neel, Aditi and their unconditional love, she was in tears.

I pulled her face over my lap and gave her a gentle kiss.

"Can't you do something to help them?" She asked me.

“I will try my best sweetheart. I love you.”

Suddenly, she burst in tears.

“What happened my dear?” I pulled her towards me and hugged her tightly.

“Do you remember the days, when people were even against us? Your parents, my parents and my entire family. I can't forget those days. Every time, it leaves me in tears.”

“But then, we are together, with each other. No one can create any distances among us ever, till we breathe. You should thank God, who has helped us. But just think about these people. Even God is not helping them. They are sweet, innocent people who have the right to spend days and nights with each other, but they aren't. In between everything, what does not end is their love.”

“Yes, I want you to be with me always. Never set me apart. I will die.”

She had hugged me tighter now. I held her face and kissed her eyes. Her eyes were closed but slight tears are still flowing out of her eyes.

“I love you. You are mine. And, I am yours.”

The feeling of love is immortal, unexplainable and most satisfying. She wanted to love me, I wanted to love her and we wanted to love our togetherness. I wished that Neel and Aditi could feel the same sometime. We lay on the bed with arms crossed around each other. I was tired and slept off in a while.

Next day, to my luck, the same inspector wasn't there. When I reached the jail, Neel wasn't in his barrack. The jailor told that he is having breakfast and will be back in some time.

I was waiting for him outside the barrack

“Good Morning Rajeev, How are you?”

It was Neel. For the first time after last two days, I saw a slight gleam in his eyes.”

“I am good. Great to see you smile.”

“Yeah! After spending two days with you and reciting my life, I feel attached to you. It felt good to see you back again.”

“Don't worry, Neel, I will be coming to see you every day. I will also try if I can get you out of this. How was the breakfast?”

'Worst, as always. It's been a habit now and I feel acquainted to this food.” I could see the innocence on his face.

“So Neel, what happened after that, you were in jail and Aditi was away from you.

But I believe she wouldn't have left you. I am sure that she would have come back to jail. Your love was true and so was hers."

Neel began to speak -

"Yes, she did come back after two days. That time, I was sitting against the wall. My eyes were closed."

"Why have you not been eating?"

I flashed open my eyes as I recognized the voice. Aditi was standing there outside the bars with Adi behind her. I almost jumped up and ran to the bars. I stared at my love with moist eyes.

"Adi told me that you don't eat properly here. This will not do." Aditi said.

"Adi is an asshole." I said, smiling dryly at him. "Look, do I look bad to you? I am totally fit and fine." I joked.

I held Aditi's hands through the bars.

"I trust you." She said, softly.

"Thank God! I don't want anything else now. They can keep me imprisoned for my entire life and I don't care as long as you trust me." I said, looking into her deep set eyes.

"I have decided to go and talk to Ranadeep. He did not listen to you. Maybe, he will try to listen to me." she said.

"No, Aditi. Ranadeep is no longer the Ranadeep we used to know. That day, when I had thought to go and explain everything to him, I had seen something in his eyes. It was not just anger, Aditi. Those eyes had hatred and vengeance brimming in them. Ranadeep has lost all power of thinking. His obsession for Ria has now transformed into sheer hatred for me. He will leave no stone unturned to make my life a hell. He won't listen to anyone. He has lost that ability completely. And, I don't want you to get involved in this, baby. I absolutely cannot see him extending his wrath to you. I don't want you to get into any problem because of me. Whatever has happened is between Ranadeep and me and there is nothing you can do about it, Aditi. Ranadeep is immovable." I explained.

"I cannot watch you living this way any longer, Neel. I have to talk to Ranadeep. He is angry with you maybe that is why he did not listen to you. But he might agree to hear me once. He needs to know the truth, Neel. Ranadeep is going way beyond his own limits to ensure that you never see the outside world and I cannot watch this without doing anything. I have to talk to him. Otherwise, I don't know what he might plan to do against you, Neel." Aditi said.

"Listen to me, baby." I said.

"No, Neel. You listen to me first." Aditi extended her hands and touched my face. "I have loved you, Neel and I have loved you more than my life. And, I cannot watch my

life go through this for no fault of his. We had promised to be there for each other during our good and bad times, love. And, this is the time that I need to fulfil that promise. I am dying there every day without you, Neel. Nothing is right. Everything around is so wrong. I need you with me. And, Ranadeep is the only one who can help us. Let me just try.” Aditi said.

“Okay.” I said, taking her hands in mine.” But promise me that you would take care of yourself.”

“I promise. And, I promise to get you out of here. We will be together and happy again.” She said, her eyes glistening with moisture.

I kissed her hands.

“We should be leaving now. The visiting hours are about to end.” Adi said.

“Take care. I love you.” Aditi, whispered.

“I love you, baby.” I replied as I let go off her hands.

Chapter 15

“That motherfucker sent you, didn't he?” Ranadeep asked Aditi. She had gone to his home when he hadn't picked up her numerous calls over the last two days.

Ranadeep was sitting in his room. Bottles of whiskey were lined up on his table. He was obviously high.

“Neel did not send me. On the contrary, he had asked me not to come to you.” Aditi said.

“You should have listened to him then.” Ranadeep said, taking another sip from his glass.

“Neel is innocent, Ranadeep. You don't know the truth. Ria's note was not true.” Aditi tried to make him understand.

Ranadeep suddenly flung the bottle of whiskey towards Aditi. It flew past her ears and hit the wall behind her with a smash, shredding itself to innumerable pieces of glass on the floor. Aditi covered her ears with her hands, shivering at the narrow escape.

“Don't you dare utter Ria's name with that dirty mouth of yours!” Ranadeep roared.

“Rana... Ranadeep, please! You need to hear me out once.” Aditi stammered.

“Get out of here before you begin to regret that you even came here.” Ranadeep shouted again at the top of his voice.

“Please, Ranadeep...” Aditi opened her mouth.

“Get out, I said!” Ranadeep roared.

Aditi walked out of the room tearfully.

P

Aditi kept on visiting Ranadeep everyday but Ranadeep refused to listen to her. He screamed at her, insulted her but Aditi didn't lose hope. She came to visit me every evening, sad and exhausted.

“You don't have to do this, Aditi!” I said to her. “I had told you Ranadeep wouldn't listen. Please stop facing his insults.”

Aditi broke down completely.

“I cannot see you here like this, Neel. I just cannot. What should I do? I love you and I cannot see you in this condition.” She said, holding on to the bars of the lock up. She sat down on the floor and started weeping inconsolably.

“Aditi, please don't cry! Please, for my sake.” I pleaded. It pricked and pained me to watch her crying because of me. I wanted to do something, anything to make her come out of this.

I sat down on the prison floor; the bars separating us.

“Aditi... here, look at me!” I whispered.

She lifted up her head. I wiped away the tears from her face gently.

“You have got to be strong. We both need to be strong. You cannot lose hope this way. You are my only strength in these times. If you start becoming weak, who will I look up to?” I said.

Aditi sniffed away her tears softly.

“He... He does not listen to me, Neel. He just does not. What do I do? The world outside is worse than hell. There is no one with me. Absolutely no one. I feel so alone and broken, Neel. I feel so lost. I want you with me. I want you close to me. I cannot stay this way anymore.” Aditi cried.

I squeezed her hands in mine.

“Take heart, baby. And, I am always there for you. Maybe, not so close physically but you know I am always there, don't you? You have to make yourself strong. For my sake, for our sake.” I tried to console her.

“Aditi, it's time. We have to leave.” Adi said from behind her.

“I don't want to go. I want to stay here.” Aditi wept. Watching her in that condition, my heart was breaking into bits. I cursed at my helplessness and inability to do something about this.

“Go, baby. We will meet again tomorrow. I love you.” I said.

“I don't want to go. I will sit here by your side.” Aditi insisted.

I looked up at Adi. He came towards Aditi and picked her up gently.

“Let's go, Aditi. It's already time.” He said softly.

Aditi tried to resist but Adi picked her up firmly.

“Please, let me stay, Adi. Neel, please. I can't live without you. I love you.”

I looked at Aditi helplessly as Adi took her away. Tears of pain and anguish rolled down my eyes.

When Adi and Aditi came to visit me the next day, I noticed a slight limp in her walk.

“What is wrong with your feet?” I asked.

Aditi avoided my eyes.

“Nothing. It's just a small sprain. Have you eaten your meal?” She asked, quickly changing the topic.

“What is it, Aditi? Did you hurt yourself somewhere? I know it's not just a sprain and

that you are lying.” I said, holding up her face towards me.

“No, Neel. It's just a sprain, I am telling you.” She insisted. I looked up at Adi. He shook his head.

“Aditi, I am feeling thirsty. Can you just go across the end of this corridor and refill my mug?” I asked, handing her the copper mug they had given me in the prison.

Aditi nodded and took the mug from me. She then walked towards the far end of the corridor.

“What is it, Adi? What is she hiding from me?” I asked.

Adi looked towards her way and then to me.

“These days she regularly goes to the Shiva temple high up on the hillock behind our hostel. It is a three kilometre distance. I told her that I would take her there. But she refused and said she wanted to walk alone all the way barefooted. In spite of my insisting so much, she did not let me accompany her. She walks the entire distance and back barefooted only to pray for your safety. It might be the sun and the gravels on the way which have caused blisters all over her feet. She isn't able to walk properly”. Adi said.

Aditi came in with water for me. She tried to hide her limp as she walked. I looked at her with moist filled eyes. I then sat down and looked at her feet. The bottom surface was covered in red swellings all over.

P

Aditi coughed as she entered Ranadeep's room. The room was heavy with smoke. The stench of alcohol and cigarettes made her nauseate. She covered her nose and mouth with her hands. Ranadeep was sitting with a group of other guys, smoking, drinking and laughing out loudly. Everyone in the room was drunk. Glasses and empty bottles were strewn about the floor.

Oh! Look who is here!” Ranadeep bellowed as he saw Aditi at the door. Some of the other guys whistled on seeing her.

“Sshhh...” Ranadeep hissed. Aditi arranged her dupatta on her chest uncomfortably. She was looking frightened.

“Come in, my darling. Come on in.” Ranadeep said.

“Ranadeep... I... I want to talk to you outside.” Aditi stammered. She had never been around this kind of atmosphere before.

“Why? What is the problem over here? Talk to me here. Come here. Come closer to me.” Ranadeep said and laughed. The other guys joined him. Some of them started singing and passing comments at her.

“Don't be afraid, Aditi. These are all my friends. And you must be used to all this, isn't

it? I am sure you and your lover must have spent many a nights....”

“RANADEEP!!!” Aditi shouted, but this sounded like a weak shout.

At this moment, Ranadeep sprang up from his seat and with a speed of lightening, he rushed towards Aditi and hit her fiercely on her face.

“Aaaaah!!” Aditi screamed as her face fell towards her side. Ranadeep then dug his fingers into her hair and dragged her across the room. He threw her on the floor.

“Aaaaaaaahhhh!!” Aditi cried as she hit the floor with a thud.

“No one raises voice at me! There was only one girl who had the right to do that and she is not there with me anymore.” Ranadeep roared at her.

He then picked up a bottle from the table and brought it towards Aditi.

“Here, drink this.” He said. Aditi spun her face away in disgust. Ranadeep clutched her face and brought it towards himself.

“Ranadeep... wha... what... leave me... you are hurting me Ranadeep... Please!!” Aditi wailed.

Ranadeep pressed the mouth of the bottle to her lips and held her throat. He then shoved the whiskey down her throat. Aditi coughed and cried. She threw up alcohol mixed with saliva. The others laughed as they enjoyed the scene before them. Tears were streaming down Aditi's face. She was helpless.

“I... I beg of you, Ranadeep. Please let Neel out of the jail. He is innocent, please believe me. He was trapped. He did not do anything. It is all a lie; it is all a trap... please...” Aditi cried before him.

Ranadeep glared at her with beastly eyes. He then brought his hands to her face gently and began to wipe away the tears streaming down her cheeks. Aditi winced and moved her face away. Ranadeep then moved his hand down from her face and around her neck. He rubbed the back of her neck and started descending his hands down to her body. Aditi began to crawl away in shock and horror.

“Ranadeep... wha... what are you doing.” Aditi stammered, her voice filled with fear. She began to drag herself backwards.

“Shhhh... ssshhh...” Ranadeep whispered. “Don't be afraid of me, Aditi. I am not going to hurt you, see? I am just going to admire you gently.” Ranadeep dug his nails into her arm and pulled her forcefully towards himself.

“Rana..deep... please...” Aditi cried and begged before him. She tried to crawl away from him but his grip was strong.

Ranadeep began to move his face closer to Aditi. She flinched as the stench of liquor and smoke filled breath began to come closer to her. Ranadeep pulled at her face and held her tightly at the waist. He then began to bring his lips closer to her.

“I will just... admire you...” Ranadeep began to hum softly and menacingly. Aditi wriggled and struggled in his grip. He was now inches close to her lips.

“Ranadeep... noooooo!!” Aditi screamed and landed a sudden tight slap across his face and pushed him with her feet. Ranadeep was thrown back. Aditi was shuddering with fear.

Ranadeep's eyes reddened with fury as he turned towards Aditi. He picked up Aditi by her hair and threw her against the wall. She cried in pain as she hit the wall. Her dupatta was thrown off to the floor. Ranadeep rushed at her menacingly. He clenched her face.

“You want your fucker out of the jail, don't you?” Ranadeep asked.

“Ye... yes...” Aditi stammered and nodded as fresh tears raced down her face.

“And, how badly do you want to see him out of the jail?” Ranadeep's eyes bored into her.

“Wha... what do you mean?” Aditi asked as she coughed at the smoke around her.

“I will get him out of the jail.” Ranadeep said.

Aditi's tear filled eyes opened wide.

“Really? You... you will get him out..? Really... Ranadeep?” She asked.

“Only on one condition.” Ranadeep spoke.

What...What condition? She asked.

“You will do as I say.” Ranadeep demanded.

Aditi stared at Ranadeep in horror. Ugly imaginations began to cross her mind.

“You will have to marry me.” Ranadeep said, after a brief pause.

Aditi's world suddenly came to a standstill. She could not believe what her ears had just heard.

“What?” She asked, her eyes widening in disbelief.

Ranadeep smiled. He remained silent for some time. “He took away my love from me. Now, I will do the same with him. Only then he will know my pain. He will realize my condition and he will get to know what it feels like to see your love being snatched away from you in a matter of minutes. I won't let him get away so easily. He will have to see his love being dragged away from him just like he dragged mine.” Ranadeep spoke.

“You... you can't do this... Ranadeep. Please!” Aditi wept before him. She folded her hands together and begged him for mercy.

“Please, Ranadeep, please... I am sorry for what happened with Ria. I know how difficult it is with you...”

“You don't fucking know how difficult it is with me!!” Ranadeep roared angrily as he banged his fist on the wall.

“Please trust me, Ranadeep... Neel did not do anything... he understands your pain... but he...” Aditi cried.

“He does not understand!” Ranadeep bellowed again. “I will make him understand now.”

“Please Ranadeep... don't do this to us... please, I beg you” Aditi wept and pleaded before him.

Ranadeep left her side and walked over nonchalantly toward his friends. He sat down with them and lighted a cigarette.

“Think about it and then come to me.” He said.

“Why are you doing this?” Aditi asked as she collapsed on the floor slowly. Her back grazed against the wall.

“I told you already. This is the best vengeance I could take. He will have an easy life in the prison and I cannot let him have that, not as long as I am alive.”

Aditi threw her head against the wall and wept.

“It's a win-win, you see.” Ranadeep continued calmly as he puffed out a cloud of smoke from his mouth. “You want him out of the jail and I am giving you that. And, you will have to pay just a very small price for it, isn't it? Think about it, girl. I am giving you a chance to save your love. You want that, don't you? That is the only reason you have been coming here to me all this time, haven't you? I am giving you what you want, Aditi. I am giving your love's life back. Otherwise, you know he is going to rot there behind those bars all his life. Do you wish to see him like that all his life? Do you not want to see him free from all his charges and roam about as a free man?” Ranadeep kept on instigating.

Aditi fell silent. She held her hair and wept her heart out.

“I am not asking for a very big price, am I?” Ranadeep continued. “After all, I am not a bad guy at all. Am I, everyone?”

His friends smirked at his words.

“Wouldn't you agree to a small sacrifice for your love? You love him and love is all about sacrificing, isn't it?”

There was a pause.

“Okay, let me make it a little easier for you. I will give you two days to think over it and then you decide whether you want your lover outside the prison or you want to watch him grow old and die in there. Maybe, they will even hang him to death if I say so.” Ranadeep finished.

It is a small price for your love's life. Love is all about sacrificing.

The words bore through Aditi's head. She thought of Neel finally getting to live a free life. She thought of Neel not having to be at the receiving end of all the dirty rumours around. She thought of him living a normal life again and not as a convict.

“I will marry you.” Aditi said, suddenly. Her face was grim and serious. She looked up straight at Ranadeep.

Ranadeep gave a low whistle.

“Oh! That was a quick decision! Now, that is what I call true love.” Ranadeep said and his friends clapped around him.

“But you will have to get him out of the jail and get him free from all the charges that are against him.” Aditi said, wiping away her tears with her sleeve.

“Sure. That is a promise to you from Ranadeep Thakral.” He said.

“Then I am ready to marry you right now.” Aditi said.

Ranadeep raised his eyebrows and gave a crooked smile.

“Look at you!! So desperate to see your love out and free! Or is it just the eagerness to marry me, haan?!” He winked and let out a loud hearty laugh.

“All right, it's a deal. I will set your love free from all the charges and you will have to marry me.” Ranadeep confirmed.

Aditi gave her silent affirmation with tear filled eyes. She knew that her life was going to be a hell after getting married to Ranadeep. But at that point of time, if anything did matter to her it was - Neel, his life and his freedom. So what if her life would be on stake, so what if Neel would not be with her, so what if their dreams won't be coming true... at least Neel will be free to live his life.

She had taken her decision. A decision which was going to change their life for forever.

Two days later, Aditi and Ranadeep exchanged garlands. As Ranadeep applied red vermilion on Aditi's hairline, some of it fell over her face. The red powder mixed with Aditi's tears and flowed like blood through her beautiful dead eyes.

... I Love you Rachu ...

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

I think see knows my name

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Chapter 16

A few days later

It'd been quite a few days that Aditi had not been coming to meet me in jail. I was worried about her. I also asked Adi about her but even he didn't have any idea.

Then one morning, the prison warden came and informed me that I had been released and all charges against me withdrawn.

I had no idea whatsoever of anything that had happened until Aditi called me and asked me to meet me in the evening. We met up outside the library, the usual place we used to meet earlier. She was dressed in a red saree and a Mangal sutra dangled conspicuously from her neck.

“Aditi...” I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. Before I could ask her anything, she explained to me everything that had happened in past few days. I collapsed on the bench as she finished the story.

“How could you...?” I asked. I was almost in a trance. I was free, yet I suddenly felt chained by circumstances. I stared at the red vermillion on Aditi's head. It now had someone else's name on it. I did not know what to say, I didn't know how to react. There she was, the girl whom I loved, the girl who I wanted to marry, the one with whom I wanted to grow old with, yet there she was; gone in a flash, just like that. Aditi had sacrificed her love to get back her love. Life's irony flustered me.

Aditi came and sat there beside me. We looked at each other and through each other.

“I had no other choice.” She said, softly. “I could not see you in there anymore. I wanted to be here with you again.”

She leaned and hugged me tightly, perhaps for the last time. We did not speak much that evening. Our silence spoke all we intended to say to each other.

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Life was never the same for Aditi and me again. Ranadeep made sure that we had no respite in any form. He would come home drunk and vent out all his frustrations on Aditi. He would hurl his choicest of abuses at her and insult her before his friends. Every night, as Ranadeep and his friends got high on liquor and smoke, Aditi had to stand there watching and act according to the instructions of Ranadeep. He made her fetch and prepare drinks for them, he made her stand there and watch them getting drunk and abusive, he made her listen to all the insults and abuses he and his friends hurled at her, he made her stand and watch him when he and his friends brought other girls home and got dirty with them. He had enslaved her. Aditi had to stand there for whole nights watching them drink, break glasses, dance obscenely before her, make out with the women they brought and finally when every one of them would be out, she would clean the entire mess. On nights that she refused to do any of this, Ranadeep would hit her and

beat her. He would grab her throat and pin her against the wall threatening to kill her if she denied his orders.

Despite everything, he made sure that Aditi was meeting me. He wanted the sadistic pleasure of making me watch a broken and tortured Aditi every single day. He knew I was helpless. I could not do anything to save her. On the first evening, when I had seen bruises and blue patches on Aditi's face and neck, the blood from my entire body had boiled. I had held her as she fell in my arms and wept desperately. But Aditi had forbidden me to do anything. I felt like a helpless coward watching the girl I loved go through so much emotional and physical trauma.

A couple of months had passed since the day Aditi got married to Ranadeep. This was the first evening when she hadn't shown up. I waited for her till much beyond our usual time. When an hour had passed and she still hadn't come, I called up her number. There was no answer. I kept on trying for another half an hour but she did not pick up my phone. I panicked.

At Ranadeeps house, Ranadeep slapped Aditi tightly across her face. She fell to the floor and her nose hit the glass table on her side. For a moment everything darkened around Aditi. She closed her eyes to steady herself. When she opened them after a moment, she felt her nose was running. She touched her nose with her hands and saw blood trickling out of it.

“You bloody, filthy slut!!” Ranadeep screamed and slapped her again. “You sleep around with that motherfucker and now he has put a bastard in your belly, haan?!”

“Ranadeep... please...it is my child!!!” Aditi cried.

“You are my wife!” He bellowed. “How dare you have someone else's child in your womb?” He kicked Aditi on her chest. She cried in pain.

“You are going to make him just like his fucker father when he grows up, aren't you? But I won't let him grow up. I am going to kill him right here!” Ranadeep said and kicked Aditi on her stomach. Aditi howled in pain.

“No...no...please, Rana...Ranadeep... not my child... please!! You won't do anything to my child!! I will do whatever you say... but please... just don't take away my child from me!!” Aditi wailed before him. Ranadeep picked up his bottle of whiskey and flung it at the wall with full rage. It smashed to the floor in pieces. Ranadeep picked Aditi up and threw her over the scattered pieces of glasses. He then stormed off the room, leaving Aditi crying and clutching her bloody hands.

Ranadeep had turned into an animal. No emotions, no relations... just revenge, revenge with Neel, Aditi and his own life.

She never came to meet me again. At that time, I had no idea that my fate had been written. My freedom was near... very near to me.

Chapter 17

It was past midnight. I lay on the balcony of my single room rented apartment. I hadn't gone back to the hostel or college after coming back from the jail. There was no use. Other than Aditi and Adi, the entire university was against me. I knew I would not be able to lead a normal life if I went back to college. I had taken up a small job at a warehouse nearby and with the meagre payment that I received, I had rented a one room apartment in a small locality. My life was far from normal here too, but at least here I was away from the prying eyes and comments from people who did not even know the truth. Adi came to pay me a visit once in a week. He was my only link to Aditi. It was through him that I had come to know that Aditi was pregnant with our child. I hadn't been able to even meet her even once after that.

I lay there on the cold floor of the balcony gazing at the black sky above me. The night was silent around me except for an occasional bird that screeched from a branch of some tree. The sky was pitch dark. The moon had veiled itself behind the clouds and there was not a single star that could be seen. I missed Aditi. Lying there in the dark, I wondered how my life had become similar to the dark sky above me. There was no moon and no stars to help me guide my way through the darkness. All the light had been snatched away from my life, leaving me in an ubiquitous place of darkness. Every day, I walked through this darkness, groping and stumbling through my way, in search of a single ray of hope. Like a man moving across a dark alley, I did not know where I was going. I just kept walking. My life had lost its purpose and meaning. I was like a blind man now, unable to see my way. I wondered how my entire life had changed over the last few months. The intensity of it all shook me from within. My entire world had come crashing down on me all at once. It was like a sudden huge flood had broken into my life and washed away every bit of it. I was left with nothing. It had taken with it my best friend, the one who was a brother to me, a family that was my home away from home and it had taken away my love from me.

I thought of the night I had set foot in the university campus. I had brought with me my dreams and the dreams of my family back home; of a father who worked day and night as a clerk to pay for my fees and of a mother whose only concern was her young son's well being. I recalled that first night in the campus when I had first met Ranadeep, lying on the ground, injured, bloodied and dirty. I remembered how I had carried him to the hospital and had waited there the entire night. I recalled how I had saved the life of the most influential son of the town and how that one night had fostered a friendship and brotherhood that was supposed to last a lifetime and beyond. Everything was coming back to me.

“You are a brother to me now.” Ranadeep had said.

I remembered how the entire family took me in as their son. How Ranadeep's father wanted to gift me that big car that I refused and how Ranadeep's mother cooked

delicious meals for me every weekend. I remembered the feeling I had experienced when the registrar had told me that Ranadeep had recommended my name for the head coordinator of the college fest. I recalled all the fun that we had during the preparations. And, then I recalled the last day of the fest. A smile curved up on my lips as Aditi's image from the night played before my eyes. How beautiful she had looked and how madly I had fallen for her. Ranadeep had come to rescue my stolen heart here too. He was the one who had told me that Aditi liked me too. He was the one to suggest me to propose her. It was his farmhouse I had celebrated her birthday in and it was there that Aditi and I had culminated our love that night on the open terrace. My smile faded away as the present loomed over me. What had I done? Ranadeep had planned my birthday party with so much love and fervour and what had I ended up doing? Guilt began to consume my entire body and conscience. Why did I have to try and get close to Ria in the first place? I should not have gone to talk to her. I should not have helped her with all the assignments. I should not have gone on to be friends with her. But my intentions were never wrong. Everything that I had done, I had done so for Ranadeep. All I had wanted was to help Ranadeep. I had wanted Ria to realize how much love Ranadeep had for her. All I had ever wanted was to get Ranadeep out of his heartbreak, to give him Ria's love. But I should not have gotten drunk that night. The entire fault is mine. Neither would I have befriended Ria, nor would she have mistaken my friendly gestures to be beyond friendship. I should have told Ranadeep at the very beginning when Ria had confessed her feelings to me. Everything is my fault.

The ring of my cell phone suddenly broke through the still night. I was abruptly jerked up from the flurry of thoughts that were playing on my mind. I got up and looked at my phone. It was an unknown number. The time was well past midnight. Who could it be at this hour, I thought to myself? I hesitated a while before picking up the call.

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone, slowly and cautiously.

There was no answer.

“Hello?” I said again. There was no one on the line. I was about to put the cell phone down when I heard voices from the other end. I put the phone to my ears. A man was screaming. I could hear a girl's voice faintly. She seemed to be crying. A loud noise then ripped across the line, like a belt or a cane hitting a body. I heard a far off scream.

“You won't listen to me, haan?” A man's voice boomed through the phone. RANADEEP!! My eyes widened with horror as I recognized the voice at the other end. I heard a slap and then a girl's scream. As the intensity of Aditi's voice sunk inside me, my heart stopped beating.

“You will do exactly what I tell you to. Otherwise, you know what I can do to you, don't you?” Ranadeep was saying. I heard the laughter of men behind.

“Please, Ranadeep, please!! What have I done to you? Why are you doing this to me?” Aditi's sobbing voice was now clearly audible. A lump formed in my throat and it stuck

there.

The belt hit her body again and she screamed. I clenched my fists. My entire body shook with horror and rage.

“What have you done to me, you ask? Don't you know what you and that bastard lover of yours have done to me? How dare you ask me this?” Ranadeep's deep voice rang through the phone. It sent my entire blood boiling through the body. It was clear from his voice that he was heavily drunk and completely out of his senses.

“Please, Ranadeep! Don't do this to me. I beg of you, please!” Aditi sobbed miserably.

“Neel is innocent, Ranadeep. He did not incite Ria to take her life. Please, please, try to understand. He was trying to help you.” Aditi cried desperately.

The sound of another slap pierced from within. Aditi fell to the floor with a loud thud.

“Trying to help me? And, how? By fucking my girl? Haan? This is how he was trying to help me? That bloody bastard. That motherfucker.” Ranadeep's voice was fiery with rage.

“Please, Ranadeep... please.” Aditi was begging.

“This is what both of you are good at, aren't you? Fucking around and getting fucked, right? That bastard told you that he loves you and that he would bring you all the stars from the sky for you and you believed him, haan? And, then all you did was fuck each other, isn't it? And, then he went about and put another bastard in your womb, isn't it? That is what you have in that womb, a bloody bastard!” Ranadeep was shouting.

“Please... Please don't say such things. I beg of you.” Aditi was sobbing uncontrollably now.

“And, then he went around and trapped my Ria in his web, didn't he? He did exactly that.” Ranadeep went on ranting, without listening to anything.

“He must have planned it before hand; I am sure, that rascal. He knew Ria was rich and that's the reason he trapped her. That is the reason he went close to her. You small town middle class people are all the same, bloody pigs. Filthy parasites you all are, that live off the blood of us rich people. That bastard had his eyes on Ria's riches, didn't he? Tell me, haan? He must have told you, hadn't he? You both were partners in this, you bloody low class rotten things.” Ranadeep glowered with anger and kicked Aditi. Her painful scream pierced through the phone.

“Ranadeep, what are you saying? Why...why are you speaking such things? You know Neel is not like that, don't you? He had saved your life. Please, please, understand!” Aditi sobbed.

“That motherfucker used my Ria for his pleasure and you knew all about it. It is all your fault that my Ria is not here with me today. You took her away from me; I can never forget it.”

“Ranadeep, leave me, please let me go...” Aditi's cries were ceaseless and painful.

“Now, I will show you what it means to use someone and to be used.” Ranadeep threatened.

“No... no... please, Ranadeep, please leave me alone, for the sake of the child in my womb, please leave me...” Aditi begged and sobbed.

“You do as I say or that child of yours dies with my own hands. I could not kill that fucker lover of yours but I swear on Ria, I will kill that bastard growing in your womb if you refuse to do what I say.” Ranadeep's voice was menacing and furious.

“I beg of you, please...” Aditi said, her voice tired and exhausted.

“Bloody middle class slut!! That's what you are. And, that's how that bastard was put inside your belly. Now, you listen to me, you pimp. My friends are there in the other rooms. You will go there and do whatever they ask you to do, do you get that?” Ranadeep growled.

Every nerve in my body slithered with anger and disbelief as I heard what Ranadeep was asking Aditi to do. In his drunken state and rage, he had lost all his senses.

“Ranadeep, please, please don't do this to me... please” Aditi pleaded before him.

Ranadeep hit her with something again and Aditi's pain reverberated through the line.

“You will do as I say, do you understand? If at all you want that rascal inside you to be alive, you will not refuse whatever I say or ask you to do. You have been slutting around with that fucking lover of yours, haven't you? Now, you will be at my friends' service.” Ranadeep sneered.

“Hahaha!!” He bellowed.” My friends will enjoy you, I am sure!! Make it entertaining for them, won't you? Everyone enjoys a colourful night in the bed. And, after all, you are an experienced player... let them have as much of you as they want...”

Aditi's cries filled the room. She was sobbing, weeping miserably and begging Ranadeep to let her go, to not make her do this.

A raging fire broke through my entire being. I hit the floor with my fist in anger. I had had enough of Ranadeep's idiosyncrasies. Tonight, he had crossed all the limits of my anger. I could not let him do this to Aditi. I had to stop him.

In the next five minutes, I was on my way to Ranadeep's house, my eyes red with anger and disgust and my body shivering with inexplicable rage. Everything that we had ever done for each other was forgotten, every bit of friendship was shredded and each instance of brotherhood that we shared was erased from my memory. All that I knew and cared for now was Aditi and our child in her womb.

I entered the door of the first floor hall and as I stood there transfixed looking at the scene before my eyes, a chill ran down the entire length of my spine. My blood dried up.

Aditi was kneeling on the floor, her eyes swollen and tired. Bruises gaped from her face and arms. Ranadeep was looming over her, holding a revolver aimed at her head.

He turned around on seeing me.

“Oh! Look, who is here! Your prince in shining armour. He has come to save his damsel in distress, hasn't he?” Ranadeep bellowed.

“Put the revolver down, Ranadeep.” I said, my voice cold and emotionless. “Your grudge is against me. Stop making her a victim of all of it.” I continued.

“Neel... Neel... please, he is going to kill me and our child... please do something, Neel.” Aditi looked at me and pleaded.

“Oh, he's not going to do anything!” Ranadeep cut her in, glaring at me, his revolver still looming menacingly over Aditi's head.

“Leave her alone, Ranadeep. I speak to you for the last time.” I said, looking directly in his eyes.

“Oh!! Are you threatening me?” Ranadeep let out a loud laugh that rang across the hall.

“Look at you!! You motherfucking bastard!! You are threatening me now, are you? Did you forget who saved you from rotting in prison for the rest of your life? And, this is the deal your slut here agreed to in lieu of your safe life. I have married her and I can do whatever I wish to with her now. And, if she does not listen to her husband, this is the price she has to pay. Let's see what you can do to save her.” Ranadeep brought the revolver close to Aditi's forehead. His fingers closed around the gun. He brought his index finger to the trigger.

“You killed my love, you killed my Ria and this is how you are going to pay for it.” Ranadeep said, his fingers gripping the revolver.

Aditi opened her eyes in horror.

“Ranadeep... for the sake of my child... please.” Aditi pleaded through cracked and hoarse throat.

Ranadeep set to press the trigger.

“Ranadeep... Nooooooooooooo!!!” I cried as I ran and took a leap into the air. There was a sharp noise and the shattering of glass as the trigger went off and the noise of the gunshot ripped through the air. Ranadeep fell to the floor with a thud. I lay over him, my hand clutching his right arm that still held the revolver. He had missed the shot. I had leapt in front of him just in time; the shot had hit the window and shattered it to pieces. I turned back to look at Aditi. She was still in her kneeling position, her eyes pressed close and she held her one hand to cover her ear while the other hand was resting protectively on her belly.

Ranadeep hit me on my face. Startled, I fell sideward. He got up and aimed the revolver

at me. Just then, Ranadeep's friends came running in from the other room.

“Ranadeep, what happened? We heard a gunshot... are you all right?” One of them asked. He looked at me.

“All of you, go home. Get out of here!! I want to settle this once and for all today and I want no one here except the three of us. Go!” Ranadeep said, glaring at me.

“But... Ranadeep... what...? The other guy began.

“I said, leave!!” Ranadeep cut him in between and growled. The three guys cast a glance at me then at Aditi lying on the floor. They hesitated a while and then walked out of the hall.

Ranadeep held the revolver to my chest. Our eyes locked, for the last time. Both of us were fiery with rage. For a moment, the entire time we had spent together came rushing to me like a flood. Everything from the beginning to the night of my birthday. The very next moment, I glanced at Aditi lying helplessly on the floor, tears running down her eyes onto her bruised face. I clenched my fingers into a fist and brought it down at Ranadeep's face with my entire force. He fell back on the floor. The revolver slipped from his hand and glided across the floor. Ranadeep hadn't anticipated this move. He staggered and stood up. He was drunk and was hardly able to stand. Before he could run to get the pistol again, I landed a fist into his stomach. He bent double, holding his stomach in pain. Standing up, he kicked me with his knee and I crashed against the wall. He rushed to pick up the revolver. Quick on my feet, I ran and grabbed him from behind throwing us both on the floor again. Ranadeep lay on his stomach and I on top of him. He struggled and inched closer to the revolver that lay just a little further from his hand's reach. We heaved and sighed as we fought to get to the revolver first. Just as Ranadeep extended his hand to grab the pistol, I caught his hand. He hit me with his other hand on the face. I ducked and landed a head butt on his skull as I clutched at the revolver. We struggled over to stand up, the revolver held in between our bodies. I hit him on his stomach with my knee and turned his fist around. My one hand was now over his neck the other hand still holding on to the revolver. Ranadeep twisted his hand that held the revolver and now it was aimed at my side, just missing his stomach by inches.

“I am going to kill you today, I swear on Ria, you motherfucker!” Ranadeep said.

I stared at the gun aimed at my side. Ranadeep's fingers closed in on the trigger. I twisted my hand around his and closed my eyes. The end was here, at last. The next moment, there was a gunshot and Aditi's shrill scream rang through the room. I closed my eyes and for a moment, all I saw was darkness. Then, I felt Ranadeep's grip loosen over me and the gun fell to the floor. I opened my eyes. Ranadeep lay there on the floor by my feet, blood rushing out from his stomach and making a pool on the floor. I stood there over his flowing blood; my hands were painted in red. I slumped on the floor, staring at Ranadeep's dead body before me. His eyes were still open. Aditi ran to me and hugged me, fresh tears running out of her swollen eyes. I placed my hands over Ranadeep's eyes

and closed them shut.

Ten minutes later, I made a phone call. I sat there on the floor with Aditi in my arms as we waited for the police to arrive.

Epilogue

With this, Neel stopped speaking....

“What next?” I asked.

Neel continued “Nothing much after that. The police came and took me away. They kept me behind the bars. I was accused of murder and was given lifetime imprisonment. The lights of life turned off. But again, in the next few months, Aditi, opened the doors of happiness for me. She gave birth to a beautiful girl who gifted me some smile and a reason to live within the confinement. We named her 'Aisha'.

Aditi and I decided that it won't be safe for her to reside in this city anymore. This place wasn't a land of life, at least for the three of us. Ranadeep was gone, but his family, his friends and his influence was still high among the people. They would have still harmed Aditi and Aisha. Moreover, half of the city abused Aditi, so she wouldn't be getting any job even.

She took a small house in New Delhi. Aisha's giggles made the house a home. In a short time, Aditi found a job in a software company. Initially, she used to come to meet me every weekend along with our baby. She used to shoot a number of videos of Aisha doing different things and show me each one of them. Be it virtual, Aditi tried to give me the entire glimpse of Aisha's acts. We even celebrated her first birthday together in the jail. One day, I saw Aditi coming towards me. I didn't see Aisha with her. My nerves pulled up all of a sudden and I asked her the same.

The very next second, I saw Aisha walking on her feet. A teardrop of happiness rolled out of my eyes. My purpose for life seemed to be fulfilled. I was happy to see my baby walking all by herself.

Aisha is six years old now. She is in her first grade. Aditi and Aisha have built up a world for themselves, living a life for each other, complementing each other.

Many a times, during the walk of life, Aditi breaks down completely. Whenever she comes to meet me alone, she breaks down. She tries to be very strong, but the tears never seem to dry off her eyes. But then she comes back to life. She knows her responsibilities. The responsibility of being an ideal mother. Though, Aisha has wiped off some tears of her life, she has a sea of emotions within her; those emotions which have been built out of enormous pain. She may have died, it would have been a simple end of indispensable pain for her. But she didn't, she decided to live for me, for our daughter and for our love.”

Neel placed his hands in the pocket of his dress and took out the picture of a small girl. It was his daughter Aisha, his hope for life.

“Why don't you try to move out of this jail? It's been seven long years but you never raised a single request for bail or a petition?”

“I don't want to get out from this prison because I know that we can never live together. Even if I do, I will be creating a doom for my daughter. Aditi and Aisha are living a peaceful life. I do not want the world to know that Aisha is my daughter. I don't want people to call Aisha the daughter of a murderer. After a lot of pain and molestation, Aditi has got some peace in her life. I do not want this to shed off. I am happy to be in jail for my entire life, if my Aditi and Aisha are at peace. I don't want the worldly comforts.” He replied, still calm but emotional. I could sense the moist in his eyes.

This time, my eyes were in tears. I was in the catastrophe of mixed feelings, full of pride and pain. Proud of the fact that I went to interview Neel and pain due to his shattering life story.

After a few normal conversations, I left the place.

This interview left an astounding impact over me. Throughout the night, I kept on thinking about Neel, Aditi and their true love.

Love - what is it? Ever in my life, I was unsure of true love. I always believed that love is an amalgam of trust and desire. The trust which is born out of hope of living with each other and the desire which arises from due to the attraction of opposite sex. Love, as per my thoughts, was feeling safe and comfortable with your partner.

But today, I understood a new definition of love. A definition which was much remorseful than one can ever think of. A definition which comes above all kinds of pain. A definition which is much more intriguing than anything else. A definition which does not seem to exist even in the most romantic love stories, a definition which is immortal but real. A definition which changed the way of my thinking towards love.

Ever since I had my wife, Priya, with me, I had a loving home. I believed that love is when she cupped my face and kissed me in the night. I thought that love it at its peak when we are in each other arms making love with each other. Sometimes, during the days when our parents didn't allow for our marriage, I used to think of giving up.

But today, I got to know that love never gives up. Love is all about caring for the other person whom you love and letting one's own self go in vain. Love is all about rendering your entire life for someone you love. Love does not see if the other person would be his/her life but it's all about living your life for someone without the hope of living together. Love is not just about living with each other. Instead, love calls for living for each other. Love does not lie in ownership of one another. But love is without ownership.

Are these two human beings or they are the angles sent by God? On one hand, it's Aditi who has given up her smile and has been facing inhumane behaviour since years. How painful would it be for a woman who has been opened by his husband to

his friends? Just because Ranadeep spares Neel's life, she bore every pain with silence. She faced all the inhumane behaviour silently without even a single complaint. On the other, there is Neel; the guy who is innocent, but living his life in a hell without a single ray of hope, just to ensure that the world does not talk rubbish about Aditi.

Oh my dear God! Where is your justice? Why are you giving so much pain to these beautiful people? Have you also closed your eyes, similar to the statue of law? What are you up to? Can't you see what has been happening for seven long years? You help the good people, then why don't you help these two innocent souls? Why are you so adamant to create a void in their lives?

In my life, I have never ever seen such lovers. Some of the most famous love stories talk about Romeo-Juliet, Heer-Ranjha. But the real love story of Neel-Aditi has overshadowed everything. The characters in those love stories just died once for each other, but Neel and Aditi are dying each and every day, just for each other.

I wish that someday, someone observes that Neel isn't a criminal and rescues him from all the pain that he has been facing every day. I wish that someday, Aditi comes to the jail but not just to see Neel but to take him back with her. I wish that one day; Aditi and Neel can proudly say to the world, "Yes, it is our child."

I wanted to help them, but I was helpless. I wanted the world to know about the truthfulness of their love. This was the most painful love story the world would have ever heard of. Moreover, it wasn't a play but a love story of two existing people. People must know about their life, their sacrifices and their commitments.

One day, while I was lost in the thoughts of the true soul mates, I struck up an idea. The idea was to pen down "SOULMATES, Love without Ownership." and bring before the world the most remorseful love story of all times.

The story of true "SOULMATES."

... I Love you Rachu ...

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

I think see knows my name

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