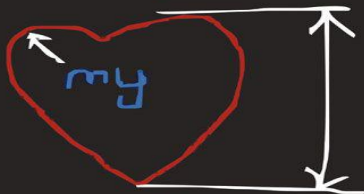




How¹ + \sqrt{i} ≥ got



{Girl++} = Back

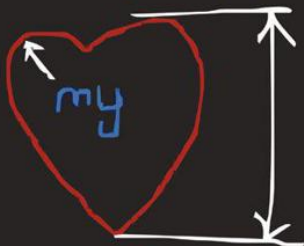
How I got My Girl Back...!

a nerd's guide to dating...

Arshat Chaudhary



How¹ + \sqrt{i} ≥ got



{Girl++} = Back

How I got My Girl Back....!

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How I Got
My Girl Back...
Cupid spells magic on a geek
Dedicated
To my father...
who despite of all the
hardships in life,
always chose to do the right thing...

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Prologue

Sometimes in life, you want to stand atop a hill and scream – sometimes out of happiness, sometimes out of sorrow. I think that's how the concept of 'a story' was born.

This is my story.

I am writing this for my friends Kunal Nair and Umesh Purohit who could never get a single girl to like them. My story is for guys like them who could never get the girls they liked.

Why should you read this? After all I am no IITian; neither do I have an IIM degree. I am just an ordinary guy. Maybe I am a nerd. But, I am definitely an ordinary guy. Well, that's precisely why you should read it... because I am ordinary... a nobody. I will share with you what I learnt about girls, in my endeavour to get the only girl I loved.

I am not giving any tips or tricks here. I don't have any. I am just narrating my story. For tips and tricks you can always visit Askmen.com or buy magazines like Debonair. If you ask me, they are camel crap, except for the photos, of course. Most of these male centric mags are written for men who want to woo women in the west. I would be damned if there is something to help us Indian men to get our girls.

There are few guys like Akshay Sarin who are a great help though. I wonder how things would have been if Akshay is removed from the scheme of things. I wonder if I would be writing this story had he not been there.

After tackling calculus and Fluid mechanics for so many years, typing away to glory on a computer should be easy, right? Well, it's not. The words are difficult to come by. Why can't I write a story in numbers! Hmm... let me start like this -

This is my story.

Chapter 1

Knowing your Hero and his Roomies

“Zindagi ke safar mein gujar jaate hain jo mukaam...

Woh... phir nahi aate, woh... phir nahi aate...”

My Nokia N70 mobile phone had an amazing alarm tone... With eyes half open, I saw the time... 5:57a.m. I pressed the snooze button.

After five minutes, it rang again ...

“Zindagi ke safar mein gujar jaate hain jo mukaam...

Woh... phir nahi aate, woh...phir nahi aate...”

I pressed the snooze button again... In another five minutes, it rang again. I wanted to press the snooze button again, when Kunal got up from the adjacent cot and hit his pillow on my head three times. He cursed my ancestors and went back to sleep.

Kunal Nair – The mallu dude, who spoke English with an American accent. He worked with a BPO here, in Pune. He completed his B Com from Cochin in the second attempt. How Kunal didn't manage to get girls with his chocolate boy looks remains a mystery to me. He's the kinda guy who gets – “oh, he's so cute” from girls but it always turns out that it was “sisterly love” from the girl's side. If I have to compare him with an actor, I will say he looked like the young Aamir Khan. Kunal's father worked for the Income Tax department. Apparently, he was an important guy. In fact, Kunal did a small stint with the IT dept. but got bored and decided to leave the cozy confines of Cochin. Later in one of his drunken states, he told us what really happened. Kunal had a fetish for Silk Smitha, the fat mallu actress, well known for her B-grade exploits. Late night, he used to watch Silk Smitha special on Surya TV. That was one of the reasons he took two attempts

to clear B Com. Once, it so happened that Kunal was watching Surya TV in his dark drawing room, looking at raunchy Smitha, and his dad came in the room and caught him getting high on Smitha. And that was that. Kunal left home and came here. Smitha spoils the future of one more young man.

I got up, with eyes only half open and eyelids as heavy as Sachin Tendulkar's bat, and stood in front of the washbasin. I picked my toothbrush out of the holder. Applied toothpaste and started brushing. The toothpaste tasted funny and it was kinda frothy. Then it dawned on me... "Aak thoo... thoo... thoo..." By mistake I had used shaving gel instead of toothpaste.

I made my way to the loo, it was locked. "Umesh you dog, get out of there." I didn't get his ways; he gets up at 6 to shit and then goes back to sleep again. I mean how stupid is that?

Umesh Purohit- Probably the biggest loser in our group - The reason why dads spy on their daughters' boyfriends. It's because of testosterone driven scum bags like him. Good decent guys like me were always seen with suspicion by the girls in my college. He was my junior in Mechanical Engineering college. Never did he work hard. He worked in a small consultancy. He was the same lazy guy even today.

He drooled at every girl who belonged to FC (Fergusson College). He knew where they lived, what course they had enrolled in, what language they spoke at home, etc.

In looks, he was the exact opposite of Kunal. By opposite, I mean opposite. While Kunal was fairer than Karishma Kapoor, Umesh was darker than Sanath Jayasuriya. In fact, he even looked like him, only worse. He was losing hair at a rate faster than Jayasuriya though. He was also like one foot shorter than him. In the last few lines, I

realise that I have defamed Jayasuriya for no reason!

I was getting late for office. My office was far from where we lived. We live in front of FC, aka Fergusson College aka maal road and my office was in Hingewadi, which is on the outskirts of Pune. Umesh was still in the loo, I decided to take a bath first and then answer the nature's call, which was sending a lot of miscalls by now.

I took a bath, went to the loo and then went directly to Akshay's room to dress up. Well, don't get any ideas, we had only one cupboard and it was in Akshay's room.

Akshay Sarin- Akshay was what all of us wanted to be like. His dad had a chemicals business in Delhi. Akshay was increasingly rich and increasingly handsome. He was 6'2", broad-chested, had a dazzling smile (shit this is beginning to sound like gay!). He had biceps thicker than all three of us – combined! At 23, he was youngest among the

group, still the most experienced when it came to girls, again- combined! Akshay was an IT engineer and an alumni of BITS, Pilani. He worked for an American software company- Kemp Solutions. In short, he was everything that I wanted to be, rich, tall, handsome, witty, high salaried and most importantly a hit among girls...

Akshay was still sleeping. I opened the cupboard and wore the first shirt that I saw in there. I stood in front of the mirror. I was 25 but looked older... I hadn't shaved that day- I found a gray hair in my beard around the chin, mocking at me. I had lost count of the number of gray hairs on my head...

So this is me- Devdutt Rastogi aka Dev. I had joined Von Wahl Electric as a trainee engineer around three years ago. Now I was the project leader there. I liked the company. It's Germany's number 1 electrical company. But I hated the job. I was a mechanical engineer, I shouldn't have to do electrical work. It

sucks. It's like asking Shoaib Akhtar to bowl leg spin, instead of right arm fast. But I stuck here because of the brand name and the job safety associated with a German company.

So that's your hero. Not much of a hero, right?

I found my bag which had the laptop, saw Kunal bundled cozily in his bed, with the pillow he had used to hit me, between his legs. Umesh was sleeping in the next room; his face had an innocent satisfaction which comes only when you sleep after a shit. Akshay was sleeping in the next room; he was wearing his Tag Heuer watch. It was just one of the three brands he had. I sometimes joked that if someone sold all his watches, he could buy a Ford Fusion with the money he gets after selling them. Akshay had taken great offence because I talked about 'selling' his watches. I looked at the watch in the hallway, it was

7:10a.m. I grabbed my bag, opened the door latch and moved out...

mmm

Chapter 2

Daily routine

I took the PMT bus from FC road to Hingewadi, reached my office at around 8:25. I entered the reception area of my office. Now this is the only high point of my day.

“Good morning, Dev!”

“Good morning, Pallavi.”

Pallavi Dave, our receptionist. She was pretty, like most receptionists are. In a company that had a woman: man ratio of 1:47, anything that remotely resembles a woman is rated hot, and Pallavi being a pretty woman, she was rated superhot by the guys. Almost everyone from the Trainee to the VP flirted with her. She was definitely out of my league so I never bothered to take pains to

woo her, and that I think made us good friends.

Women divide men in two groups – the brothers and the hotties. Pallavi obviously saw me as a brother, someone she could talk to; take help from, when in need, you know. I always thought I can't be friends with a woman, this friendship between me and Pallavi changed that notion of mine forever.

I worked in the Transformer Design dept. I was the Project Manager for the Bengal Electricity Board 100 MVA transformer. My job consisted of making designs on ProE (a design software that we use), gulping down gallons of free coffee and yelling at trainees (which had zero effect on them) to get the work done. Also getting yelled by my boss was a huge part of my work profile. My job also included downing free lunches, attending at least two meetings each day, and make sure that the Xerox machine was working alright. Yeah, we were assigned machines that

we had to take care of. Somebody had actually got the coffee maker as the machine, he had to take care of. Lucky him. Those things never break down. My Xerox machine, however, broke down once every two days. So every time there was a break down, it was me who had to call the technician.

“Hello, I am calling from VW Electric, our Xerox machine just died...”

“Agaiiiinn?” the technician yelled.

He made it sound like it was me who was responsible for the break down of the machine.

“Can’t you take care of the machine?” He asked when he got here.

“It’s not our problem, you sold us a bad machine,” I said.

“We bloody don’t sell machines, we just take maintenance contracts, some guy in Japan sold you this piece of crap.”

I couldn’t say anything after that. I decided to take the matter up with the Design

MD - Mr. Shankaran aka Ciggy because of his chain smoking habit. Even his laptop smelt of nicotine. Ciggy was a big man, around 50 years of age. His face had small pox marks, like Om Puri, come to think of it; he even looked like him, only Om Puri is better looking. He had a deep voice which comes only with years and years of smoking.

I entered his cabin. He was working on his laptop.

“Sir, the Xerox, err... I mean the Xerox machine broke down again.”

He continued working on the laptop.

“Call the technician.”

“Sir, I did. He said it’s a bad machine.” And I knew he was right. Xerox machines aren’t supposed to break down this often.

“Who is the engineer?” He asked the million dollar question.

“Sir, Sir Me.” I mumbled.

“So?”

Now he conveniently sidelined the fact that I was a Transformers Engineer and couldn't distinguish between a scanner and a Xerox even if my promotion depended on it. But I knew there was no use of pursuing this further. Ciggy's word was the final word. I hated this guy, he never listens. Now only if we could get someone younger, someone more dynamic, receptive to change instead of this old guy.

The moment the clock strikes 5, everyone starts to leave. I stay back to check if all the work has been done by the trainees. I finish some work and then around 6, I leave.

I reached home around 8. Kunal and Umesh were waiting for me to have dinner. We went to a nearby Shetty's udipi restaurant and have Masala Dosa. Akshay doesn't dine with us. He always has a hot date.

Over a mouthful of dosa, Kunal tells us that he was at home when Akshay brought

home his date. Akshay had to change from office wear to party wear. According to Kunal, the girl was a babe. But then Kunal feels that Silk Smitha is a babe, so no comments there.

We come back home by 9, while Akshay came by 10. He shared his adventures of the night with us, the deprived souls. We listen with great interest. Poor us, none of us had gone for a date ever. The stories that Akshay told us, sounded like from another world. By 11, all of us went to sleep...in our respective beds of course.

mmm

Chapter 3

The Medical Checkup: When it all Changed

Foreign companies like VW Electric have a lot of what I like to call 'show-shining'. Most Indians, like me, visit the doctor only when sick. No, not even sick, we visit them

only when we can't take care of the sickness ourselves.

Like for example, as a kid when I used to get sick, my grandma used to make kadha for me. It almost always worked. In rare cases when it didn't work, she used to take me to the doctor who had a small clinic down the street.

But here in VW Electric, we had to undergo regular medical checkup at the end of every month. We had a visiting doctor, a MD (medicine), grumpy old fellow. It was boring to get your checkup done from him. He was sarcastic. He could give all the mothers-in-laws of the country a run for their money.

Like this one time I had a rash on the inside of my cheek. I asked him what to do to get rid of it.

"Smoke... smoke more... smoke till your lungs blow out," he would say, making imaginary clouds of smoke. From the look of it,

it seemed he must have smoked at a point in his life.

Now, I don't smoke. I have smoked only two cigarettes and that too way back in college. I didn't like it, so I didn't smoke again. But this is no way to talk to a patient.

"But doctor, I don't smoke. Don't you, err, think that you should find the, err, cause before being sarcastic?"

"Your generation doesn't know to respect elders."

Now where did that come from? Weird old man!

It was March 30 when I received a call from the reception, it was Pallavi.

"Hello Dev!"

"Hello!" I said. I always felt happy to hear her voice.

"Do you know you have your checkup scheduled at 3:30 in the afternoon?" she asked.

“Oh, I completely forgot. Thanks for the reminder.”

“Anytime! Oh-Oh! Btw, there’s a new doctor from this month, a permanent one.”

“Oh thank God! That grumpy fellow got on to my nerves,” I let out a sigh of relief.

“I know,” she said.

“I hope this doctor is good. I hope he actually cares for his patients. Wait, I hope it’s a she. A lady doctor and a cute one too,” I said jokingly.

“Hehehehe... What else? That she have the hots for nerdy guys?”

“Hey! Whom you calling nerdy? I am quite a stud; well I will be in the future.”

“Hehe... right on... Okay, will call you later then.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“Buh-bye.”

I heard the phone click. The PC watch showed 3:20 pm. I left my seat and walked

down the stairs to the ground floor into the waiting room in the medical department.

“Mr. Devdutt, please enter the consultation room,” the assistant said. I entered the room. The room smelled of, well, medicines. I sat on a stool. The doctor entered. The doctor was a lady! Yippie!

She had a mask on and a green cap beneath which she had placed her tresses. Her eyes were, well, what’s the name of that nut? Yeah, Hazel. She had hazel coloured eyes. I imagined under that cap of hers she must have long dark brown hair...

“Dev... Devdutt, right?” She said reading my name from a chart.

Heard a small bell ring? It has a sweet sound. Now imagine a thousand such bells ringing, her voice was that sweet.

“You know Mr. Devdutt, I had a friend named Devdutt.”

“Oh...” I wanted to ask her, her name. But pretty girls make me nervous. I have never

walked across the hall to tell someone that she is pretty. Never had the guts.

She smiled a lot, I know because every time she said something her eyes would become small, like they do when we smile. She still had that mask on.

“Now Mr. Devdutt, let’s check your knee-jerk reaction.”

My name sounded so beautiful when she said it. I had hated my name, I mean my parents could have named something slick, like Rahul or Raj, but no, they had to stick to a 2000 years old name – Devdutt.

She made me sit on a high cot. With a rubber hammer in her hand, she gently hit it on my knee; my calf went flying through the air.

“Very good,” she was still going through that chart and checking some boxes unchecking others.

“Do you smoke or drink Mr. Devdutt?” She asked.

“No, doctor...”

“Hmm...”

She still had her mask and cap on, but it wasn't needed. Now I don't have any contagious illnesses, do I? She crossed a few more boxes and then with one slick movement, she removed the mask. Under the mask were her full, pink lips. Her small and cute nose, her smooth cheeks, her hazel coloured eyes, I was lost. Then she removed her cap, I can still replay it in my brain in slow motion... Her tresses falling down due to gravity, like they had a mind of their own, she swayed them, so that they would fall in place, her long, straight, dark brown hair.

I kept looking at her, like I knew her. Those lips, that cute nose, those eyes, those lovely hair, I was mesmerised by them. Not just now, but also at a time that seemed like another world to me. What was her name? It came rushing back to me. All the memories...

“Pri... Pritha?”

“Yes?!”

I saw a tinge of recognition, or maybe she just wanted to be polite and act that she remembered me too... She couldn't place me. Can't blame her, I look nothing like I used to. Not that I was super good-looking in the past or anything...

“Pritha Bakshi?”

“Devdutt... Dev? Devdutt Rastogi??”, she asked.

It all came rushing... know how it's to prick a balloon? It happened to me.

“You... you have changed... so much,” she said.

“Yeah, I know... but you, you still look as beautiful as you did 12 years ago!”

“12 years? That's how long it has been?”

“Yeah, time flies fast...” I lied.

I lied. Time didn't fly fast. In fact it crawled slowly, like Karan Johar's K3G. It sucked being alone all these years.

“So, what? You are a doctor? How cool!” I am a fan of the obvious.

“Hmm... MD medicine,” she said.

“How cool,” this happens to me, when I am nervous I say the same words again and again.

“Yeah, but you became an engineer. Electrical I suppose,” she tilted her head to the side as she asked this.

“Mechanical,” I said, brimming with pride.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“I remember you always wanted to be a doctor. You always topped.”

“Yeah, I wanted to be.”

“How cool.” Stop that.

We chatted a little, but we didn’t have much time as there were people waiting for the checkup, I had to wind up. While I was leaving, I decided to do what I had never done before. I decided to ask her out for a date.

“Well, I guess I have to go now, someone is waiting for his turn.” She said looking at the door.

“Yeah,” I said. “So, Pritha, do you like, I mean would you, like, want to have coffee with me?”

“Hehehe... you haven’t changed Dev. Of course, I would want to! Tomorrow evening? 6:30?”

“Oh...Okay...Thank you.”

Thank you? What thank you? Are you nuts? I asked myself. But did you hear that?

‘Of course!’ she said of course!

That day, I left early from office. There is a Ganpati temple on my way home. I stood outside the temple, removed my shoes, I have never entered the temple in the last three years. I didn’t this time either. I looked into the eyes of Ganesha idol kept inside.

“Thank you.”

That’s all I could mutter. I don’t know why I thanked God. I guess it was because he

never gave me anything, I don't think I got decent grades in school because of God, or I got a good job (so called) because of divine intervention. But this, introduction of Pritha in my life, at this juncture, was definitely Ganesha's work. So thanks for that, God. I owe you one.

mmm

Chapter 4

A trip down the Memory Lane: Know your Heroine

I lay down on my bed, looking at the ceiling fan. I tried to sleep, but sleep eluded me. Kunal was deep asleep. He was holding the pillow tightly against his chest. "Smitha, Smithaaaa", he went on in his sleep.

I checked on Umesh sleeping in the next room, he had a tense expression on his face. This expression will change only after his morning dump, I thought. Akshay was fast asleep in his room.

I came back to my bed and lay awake thinking about Pritha. Her long hair, her full lips, her eyes. I was transported into a time gone by.

It's the 8th grade. Pritha was my classmate. Always the topper.

I knew her since the 1st grade. We weren't close friends or anything. I was shy, so I didn't talk to girls. But I have always liked her. Even when we were kids, I loved to watch her dance recitals in school. Her hair was short then, but still as lovely.

She impressed me. I don't know why, maybe because I had heard my mother speak highly of her on school open days or maybe because mom couldn't stop praising her dedication towards studies and her hard work. I looked up to her.

I liked the same girl all my school life. I wonder how I couldn't talk to her for almost all of primary school. There was this one

time though, the one time when we had an exam and I forgot a pencil. She was sitting three benches in front of me (the closest we had been till then). I got up from my seat and asked her for a pencil. She looked at me for around four seconds. Then quietly took out a pencil and gave it to me-

“This pencil writes very fast,” she said.

Then I didn't know why she said that. But years later, she told me that she had seen my mother scold me for not being able to complete the paper on time.

Now, don't translate this into love. She didn't love me then. Maybe she liked me. But nothing more than that.

I think till girls don't reach puberty, the only people they can love is their parents. Did I? I loved her. Men can love at any age. In fact, men can love anyone at any age, maybe they are more individualistic or stuff.

After the summer vacation of 7th grade, everything changed. On the first day of the

8th grade, the grade in which boys wore full pants instead of the half pants, I saw the change in her. She was, well, she looked, more girlie. She had always been girlie, pink clips, cute key chains and all, but there was something different about her. She had curves. Subtle ones, concealed under the looseness of her pinafore, I kept looking... She was becoming a woman.

I would be lying if I say, while looking at her my eyes or my mind didn't go astray. Puberty is such a gift. It suddenly gives losers like me, enough courage to express what we have wanted to say since years...

I used to find ways to be with her. It could be something as stupid as signing for an art class. I hated art class. And here I was, taking extra classes!

I would look at her, paint her imaginations. I would be lying if I say; I didn't have 'thoughts' about her. I wanted to take her in my arms and make her mine. Maybe the

testosterone drive was too high in me or something, but I didn't feel that about any other girl.

I think she liked me too; I caught her looking at me many times. I looked back at her, but she made sure she never looked back. She would fix her glare on something, the duster, the chalk, or her hands, anything, but avoid my stare. The shyness in her, fuelled me. I felt like such a man.

Her dad worked for the Power Ministry of India. They lived in a bungalow near Vaishali Nagar in Mulund, a suburb in Mumbai.

In the year that followed, my only aim was to get some time alone to talk to her. In school, it wasn't possible. My friends made sure they teased me as soon as I got within 1 metre radius of her. She would give me a shy smile and run away from there.

The only time we met alone was in the school bus. My classmates took a different bus route, so we two were the only ones from

our class in that bus. I used to sit on the 3rd last seat, just in front of her seat. I would turn back 90 degree to talk to her. There was so much to talk. We never ran out of things to talk about in the 30 minute ride home. Her stop was two stops after mine, but I made it a point to get down at her bus-stop and walk back home.

I used to reach home a little late. My dad would ask, "The bus reached late, beta?"

I wasn't used to lying to my dad, but then, in those days, it was difficult telling your father that you had a crush on a girl and you went to drop her to her stop, which by the way, is a kilometre away from our house.

I would lie to my dad, "Umm, you see, the route of the bus has changed, now it comes from M.G. Road."

"Does it?", my father would ask smilingly.

I used to reach school early so that I could get a seat from where I could get a clear view of Pritha. She usually sat on the

second bench, I took the fourth. She was good in all subjects, but she never showed off. In fact, she would go out of her way to help the girls around her (those days, boys and girls used to sit in separate rows). She would turn around to help the girl sitting behind with some algebra equation. She would look at me, just a glance, I would look back at her and she would avert her gaze.

Then there was the bus ride after school. That was the high point of my day.

“You have lovely hair,” I said one day in the bus.

She blushed, fixed her stare on something outside the window, but she soon realised that since the bus was moving, she couldn’t fix her stare on something outside. She had her hands in her lap. She fixed her stare on her palms.

“You have deep hazel eyes,” I said smiling.

She looked up at me for a moment let out a smile that suggested she was uncomfortable with me saying such things but she wished I would continue...Her eyes would rise from her palms to meet mine; then again she looked at her palms, like she could read palms and was on a major breakthrough here.

“And you have a lovely smile,” I was enjoying it.

“Devvvv!,” she said cutely.

“You know what? You should become a doctor.” I said.

“A doctor? Why?”

“Because it would be the easiest job in the world for you... All you have to do is smile, and they would get cured already.”

“Oh shut up, Dev.”

She started talking a lot after that day. She talked gibberish but made sure that she talked, so that it stopped me from talking about her hair, her eyes and her smile. But

then, I have always done what I wanted to! I kept on talking about things, teenage hearts talk about.

The year went by; it was the last exam of the year. After the exam, we were waiting for the school bus. The bus driver had let the watchman know that he was going to be late today. So most of the kids of our bus had taken the BEST bus or if they stayed close enough, had walked back home. After all, the exams had ended today and they were not gonna waste any time of their vacation waiting for the school bus.

Pritha waited, her parents had asked not to take the BEST buses- they are dangerous, they said. So she waited. And so I waited along with her. To be honest, I found my bus more dangerous and I suspected that the driver of our bus, Mr. Sebastian, drove a truck part-time. The latter declaration comes from the observation of his maneuvering

skills, his utter disrespect for traffic rules and his vocabulary of Indian gaalis.

The bus arrived. There were only five of us in the bus. She took the second last seat; I took the one in front of her. The other three, got down on the second stop. Now there were only the two of us.

“It was such a lengthy paper,” she said.

Studies were her favourite topic.

“Yeah, but you will still top.” I said.

“Hmm... My hands are tired. Look at them.”

She put up the palms of her hands for me to see. I held her palm, brought it close to me, and kissed it. She didn't pull it back. She closed her eyes. I kissed her wrist. She let me.

We got down at the last stop. We walked back home. Tears rolled down her cheeks. I asked her what was wrong. But she wouldn't tell me. Tears rolled down her cheek, like rain on a summer evening. Men take a lot of

time to understand women. Here I was, just a boy of 14, confused and scared, wondering if my actions had hurt her.

“Pritha? What did I do wrong?” I asked, confused.

“No Dev, you didn’t,” she said touching my arm.

“Then?”

“I don’t wanna lose you.”

“You won’t.” I said. There is nothing more beautiful than a girl saying she doesn’t want to lose you.

“I am right here.” I said; spreading out my arms, a move I had copied from Shahrukh Khan.

“I have to leave.”

“Huh? Ok. I will drop you no.”

“I mean, I will have to leave Mumbai. My dad’s getting transferred to Delhi.”

The world came crashing down. I couldn’t walk more. I just stood there. She continued walking. She looked back - Her

eyes didn't meet mine. Her tears had stopped. Mine had started. We were standing within a metre's distance from each other, but she seemed like a million miles away.

She was the only girl I loved.

mmm

Chapter 5

The First Coffee Date

I had never been on a date with a girl. Pritha was the only one I ever liked, well; there was this girl in college I liked a bit, but not enough to ask her out for coffee. Even if I did like her enough, I don't think I would have the courage to go up to her and ask her out.

I hadn't broken the news of Pritha to my roomies; I didn't think there was any need to. It would have been good had Akshay known, coz with his immense experience of dating, he could give me a few pointers.

We decided to meet at Café Coffee Day near Fergusson College after office. I picked

her up from the medical department of the office.

“Hi!” she said.

She was wearing a white salwaar kameez with a blue dupatta. She had kept her hair loose and a few strands kept falling on her face. She looked lovely. I was lost.

“Hiii!,” she said again.

“Oh... hello...”

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“How are we going?”, she asked.

“We will be taking a rickshaw,” I said.

“Okay,” she said smilingly.

We walked towards the exit. Pallavi was standing there waiting for the bus. She saw me coming with Pritha. She looked at me, then at Pritha, then again at me, with a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

“Good evening Doctor... Hi Dev,” she said.

“Oh, Good evening Pallavi,” Pritha said.

“Hi Pallavi,” I said sheepishly, knowing well that I had a lot to answer the next day.

We took a rickshaw to FC road. It was a cool December evening. Winters are amazing in Pune. Not like Mumbai. There is only one season in Mumbai – humidity. A cool wind was blowing. Her hair had a life of its own. She had a hard time keeping those unruly tresses in place. A loose strand fell on her cheeks. I had this insatiable urge to tuck that strand behind her ear. But I didn't. We weren't kids anymore.

We reached CCD at around 7. The café was sparsely crowded. I ordered a Latte and she ordered a Cappuccino.

We talked; mostly about where we had been all these years and what did we study. She did her MBBS from AIIMS and her MD from King George Medical College in Lucknow. We asked about each other's families. We talked about our future plans.

I always thought, having coffee with a pretty girl would be awkward. I mean, how do you balance between beauty and coffee? Beauty is beautiful, but coffee has its own beauty. Get it? Anyway, she giggled at most of my jokes. I was the undisputed king of PJs back in college. Thankfully that talent came in handy here. There is no better feeling than a girl laughing at your jokes.

“Your smile is lovely,” I said.

“Hmm... thank you.”

She set her stare on her coffee cup. She was smiling.

Something was wrong though. It was almost as if she didn't expect me to say the exact same thing I said 12 years ago. Or maybe she expected me not to say anything at all on the first date. And she was right. In my enthusiasm, I forgot that she still stayed 12 years away from me; it was natural for her to take things slow.

We chatted for two hours; time always flew when I was with her. I remembered the lecture on 'Theory of Relativity' that Prof. Bade gave us in college.

He had said - "When you are in my lecture, one hour feels like a one year, right? But when you are with a girl having coffee, one hour feels like one minute, right?"

Well, back then, I didn't have a girl whom I could have coffee with, so I didn't know. But today I understood what he meant.

"It's 9 already....," she said.

"Oh... yeah.... wow....," I said. I paid the bill even after she insisted that she wanted to pay.

"I will drop you home," I said.

She stayed at Aundh area in Pune with a couple of girls. She had dinner plans with them.

We took a rickshaw to Aundh. It stopped in front of her building.

"I stay here. 5th floor."

“Oh... Trident apartments! How cool.”
(Oh, come on no ‘How cool-How cool’ again)

“Hmm...”

“Well, Pritha, thanks for coming.” I
wanted to say ‘in my life’, but I didn’t.

“Thanks for the lovely evening,” she said.

“Bye.”

I stood there as she entered the security
gate. Waited and she looked back.

She waved her hand. I waved back.

I took a rickshaw back to FC road. That’s
when my cell phone vibrated, I got a
message.

It was Pallavi.

“You two look perfect together...”

Someone up there wanted you two be
together.”

I smiled.

mmm

Chapter 6

New Manager comes in

I joined Kunal and Umesh for dinner later. I didn't tell them about Pritha. It wasn't the time yet. But as goes with close friends, they can always tell if something is different.

"You look so happy today!" Umesh said putting in a mouthful of masala dosa in his mouth.

"Yeah, got a promotion?" Kunal asked.

"Nahi yaar, nothing like that," I answered.

"Hmm...", Kunal said sipping on his mango lassi.

Next day, I got up earlier than usual. I felt light. You know how you feel after the first rain-showers of the season- the smell of wet earth, the light green of the leaves... Life was suddenly smiling at me. A song was playing in my head –

'Here I am' by Bryan Adams.

"It's a new day - it's a new plan
I've been waiting for you

Here I am...”

I was all bubbly-bubbly in the office, if you can call a guy that. Some guys were gossiping (or is there a different word for it when men do that?). I don't usually engage in gossip, but then since I was in such a great mood this morning, I thought – why not?

The guys were talking about the new manager. VW Electric was undergoing a structural change. Our Design Dept. MD - Mr. Shankaran aka Ciggy would no longer be the one whom we would have to report to. We were getting a new GM who would be our boss. Even Ciggy would be directly under him. Most of us were happy. After all the anger he had leashed on us during Transformer Testing, he deserved this.

But at the same time, one couldn't help feel sorry for Ciggy. After 25 years of service in VW Electric, he still would have to report to someone else. The worst part being- the

new manager was a kid freshly recruited from IIM-A.

“What’s his name?” someone asked.

“I don’t know.” someone answered.

“Ciggy was talking about some Mehrotra guy,” a trainee engineer said.

It’s amazing how much these guys knew. How come I didn’t know of this development? I had been in this company for three years now, but I still didn’t know as much as these new guys did.

“Mehrotra...hmm... must be a rich guy,” I tried to enter the conversation.

“Hehe... How do you know?” the trainee engineer said. It is customary to let out a little laugh at your superior’s joke, even if it’s as lame as the aforementioned.

“Well, don’t you watch hindi movies? Mehrotra or Malhotra or Oberoi are always super rich chaps.”

He haw haw... they burst out laughing.

I continued. "I mean, it's like the name – Saloni. If she's named Saloni, she gotta be hot!"

He haw haw haw whoo... more laughter... They had never seen me in such a good mood before.

I knew a guy in school, his surname was Mehrotra. He was super rich of course. His father was a businessman. His father owned a lot of mills in Dadar and Lower Parel. The property ran into crores of rupees. Later, he sold it to the mall developers. Many mill workers lost their jobs. He received a lot of flak for it in the newspapers. But he promised to invest money in an electrical firm and absorb these workers there. Bull shit. How can you accommodate mill workers in an electrical firm? I must have been in the 10th grade back then and even I knew this was a scam. Whatever, the mill workers were offered the job, but then kicked out in a month saying they weren't good enough.

Mehrotra didn't have to pay them any benefits, which he would normally have to since he sold their livelihood. What an asshole!

Such matters bothered me a lot in the past. But over the years, I had grown immune to such scams. Anyway, I was too busy thinking about Pritha to be bothered by such trivial matters related to society. We had arranged another date the day after tomorrow. I wanted to meet her today itself, but she was busy, also I didn't want to sound too desperate (which I was by the way).

I was at my desk, day dreaming. I couldn't stop thinking about her flowing hair, her deep hazel eyes, her cute smile, her voice like a thousand small ringing bells... The bell rang. I woke up out of my dream. The phone bell rang. Tringggg... Tringggg.

"Hel... Hello?"

"Shes cute. You guys look nice."

"Oh... Pallavi, it's you..."

“Yeah... Who else were you expectingggg?” she tried pulling my leg.

“Oh, come on.”

“Aww... you are blushing,” she teased me.

“No I am not! Men don’t blush.”

“I am having fun here.”

I didn’t mind her having fun. It was fun for me too. It reminded me of the 8th grade when my friends used to tease me by her name. Good days they were.

mmm

Chapter 7

The Second Coffee Date

Even though we were in the same office, Pritha and me, we didn’t get a lot of opportunities to meet. Her office was on the ground floor and mine was on the first. Also, I didn’t want to disturb her when she was working.

There was another reason that I didn’t want to meet her in office. In our office, due to such a healthy grapevine, news travelled

thick and fast. Since there are few girls in offices like ours, any story related to a woman spreads like wild fire. I didn't even tell Pallavi about how I and Pritha were in the same school. I probably would have, had Pallavi asked, but she didn't ask. That is why I liked Pallavi, she minded her own business.

We decided to meet at the same CCD in the evening. She wanted to go home first then come to the café. I reached early, and was waiting for her. She came in, a full ten minutes late. But it was worth it. She wore an elegant salwaar kameez. I think they call it a churidar. It was a golden brown churidar. It made her fair complexion glow. She wore thin metal bangles in her left hand and they tinkled every time she adjusted her dupatta.

"How are you?", she asked along with the tinkling of small bells.

"I was okay, but ever since you walked in through that door, I am doing great."

She smiled.

We talked about the movies we have watched and the books we have read, our favourite songs and the places we had been to.

A strand of her silky hair fell on her face; she tucked the loose strand behind her ear.

“You have lovely hair, Pritha.”

“Oh... thanks,” she said getting restless.

“And a cute smile,” I said, oblivious to her restlessness.

“Dev??!”

“Hmm?”

“I am sorry if I gave you the wrong idea.”

“The wrong idea? As in?”

“As in, Dev, I am not the kinda girls who play with a guy’s heart.”

She fell silent. I wondered what would come next.

“Dev... Dev, I have a boyfriend.”

The target has been hit. I repeat. The target has been hit.

I took a few seconds for the feeling to sink in. My heart forgot to beat during those few seconds.

“Oh... Pritha, I get it. It’s perfectly fine.”

It wasn’t fine.

“I am sorry Dev.”

Seeing her like that broke my heart. It wasn’t her mistake. It was mine. She just wanted to be friends. I jumped the gun. I was silly enough to think a girl as sweet as her would not have been wooed by a guy already.

I felt like such a fool. I don’t know if that’s what heartbreak feels like. But if you feel like you are sinking into the chair you are sitting in, then heartbreak it was. I realised Pritha was waiting for me to say something.

“Come on Pritha, you really thought I didn’t know a girl like you would have a boyfriend already?”

“So... You are alright with it?”

“Oh... completely yaar... no probs,” I said.

“Thank God.”

“Arre, no probs,” it had started again, repetition of words...

For some time, we had nothing to talk about. I broke the silence.

“So who’s the lucky guy? What does he do? Is he a doctor like you?”

“Oh no. Doctor guys are boring. My boyfriend is an engineer. And now, he’s just completed his MBA.”

“Oh... no probs, which college?”

“IIM Ahmedabad.”

“Wow...” I said. The fakest wow ever. IIM Ahmedabad is like the Amitabh Bachchan of Business Schools. There is no other.

“He is a nice guy.” She said. I don’t know if she sensed my fake ‘wow’.

“I am sure, he is.” I wasn’t too sure about that one.

“Oh... btw, he’s going to be the new Design Head, Asia Operations.”

“Which company?” I asked like a fool.

“Our company silly.”

“What?”

It dawned upon me now.

“You mean, Mehrotra?”

“Yeah, Sourabh Mehrotra. You remember him?”

Of course I remembered him. The bully. The school football team captain, three times in a row. The Casanova. In that order.

“Two years our senior na?” I asked, acting unfazed.

“Yeah.”

We talked some more then we left for our respective abodes.

On my way home, I stopped at the Ganapati temple. I stood outside the temple, removed my shoes. I looked into the eyes of Ganesha idol kept inside, I wanted to shout, but I didn't. Somehow I felt, He understood. I looked at his half broken tusk. I felt, He understood pain. He understood my pain. He understood how it feels like when you get a

life and then losing it. Just like that. Maybe, He understood. Maybe, He didn't. If He didn't, I hoped there would be a higher force than Ganesha Himself who would do with Him, what He did with me.

Sourabh Mehrotra:

I don't think it's worth devoting an entire chapter on such a jerk, so I will put it up here.

I came to know about Sourabh through my friends Rakesh and Prakash. Both of them were in the football team and Sourabh was their captain. He was a well known bully, but the teachers didn't mind that because he won the school many medals. Also, he wasn't bad at studies, and was exceptionally good at quizzes. Also, he had once broken the notice board with a hockey stick. He represented the school in so many inter-school events. But I never liked him.

I remember that sunny March morning. I was in the 4th grade, and Sourabh was in the 6th. He was the hall monitor. He had to maintain discipline in the hallway during the recess. But he and his mates were the least disciplined. They frolicked around the hall, throwing water on each other and everyone who was stupid enough to pass by.

I was walking through the hall towards my class. Sourabh came out of nowhere and stood in front of me.

“Why did you tell Rajani miss about yesterday?”, he growled. His cronies were standing behind him, giving me scornful looks.

Rajani miss was my class teacher. Yesterday, Sourabh and his friends were splashing Pepsi on each other. I was stupid enough to pass by them then, and they splashed Pepsi on the front of my pants, making it look as if I had wet my pants. They laughed and laughed as I tried to wash off the sticky

liquid. They called all my classmates and made fun of me. Everyone laughed, even Rakesh and Prakash. I felt bad. I brought it to Rajani madam's notice. She must have scolded him.

"I...I didn't tell her anything," I said.

"Then who did u tell chutiye?", he was getting angrier by the minute.

"I have to go. Please let me go."

I sounded like a girl. I tried to slip by them. He held me by my underdeveloped biceps. He was a good foot taller than me and so much stronger.

"This will remind you not to gossip."

Saying that, he swung his arm and slapped me hard. Everything blacked out. I heard a ringing. I stumbled my way to the class. The ringing wouldn't go. I reached home. My mom asked me why my left cheek looked purple. I told her that I ran into a door during games period.

mmm

Chapter 8

Enter the Dragon

I was standing on a basalt rock. Red hot magma was flowing underneath the rocks. I had a blue saber in my right hand and a steel shield in the other. It started raining. The rain drops turned to vapour before they hit the ground. They made a sound, the sound that water drops make when Udipi Anna sprinkles them on the hot masala dosa tawa.

I looked at the sky. It was neither day nor night. The sky was dark blue. There was lightening. A figure took shape in the sky. It was flying searching for something. It found me. It set its red glowing eyes on me. It came down straight at me. It came close and breathed fire on me. I raised the steel shield. Then I realised that I was involved in a fight with a fire-breathing dragon. It flew heavenwards only to come back with a vengeance. I again shielded myself from the flaming fury of the dragon. The dragon, frustrated by

now, took a high flight. I kept looking at the sky. It came down again, but this time from behind, I was too slow or it was too fast, but I couldn't shield myself this time. It breathed fire and there was an inferno.

“Zindagi ke safar mein gujar jaate hain jo mukaam...

Woh... phir nahi aate, woh... phir nahi aate...”

I woke up drenched with sweat. It was just a dream.

It was a Monday. It was also the day when Sourabh would join at VW Electric. I looked in the mirror. It felt bad, someone who had bullied me when I was a kid, was going to bully me again. I was a kid again... small, helpless and insignificant.

A Tata Safari drove in through the gates of VW Electric, followed by a Mercedes C class. All of us- the trainees, assistant managers, Ciggy and the VP stood outside the office to greet our new manager. Ciggy excused

himself for a smoke. He had already finished five smokes today.

The Mercedes stopped in front of the main office. The VP, a fat man in early 60s, stumbled forward. The door of the Mercedes opened. A tall man, wearing a black business suit and black shades, stepped out. The VP introduced himself and shook hands with Sourabh, the tall guy in the suit. I could see what Pritha saw in him. Sourabh was tall, smart and handsome. Above all, he earned a salary that I won't be able to earn till I am in my late 40s.

The VP lead Sourabh to the first floor office, Ciggy had joined us by now. The VP led Sourabh to Ciggy's cabin.

"I am sorry Mr. Mehrotra, but your office still needs a few finishing touches. Till then, can you please use Mr. Shankaran's cabin," the VP said.

“Kindly get it done as soon as possible,” said Sourabh.

He’s still an arrogant brat, I thought.

Ciggy stumbled ahead to collect his laptop and his family’s photo frame. With a sheepish smile he added-

“There you go Mr. Mehrotra.”

Sourabh was visibly annoyed at the thought of a second hand cabin.

I felt bad looking at Ciggy. A 51 year old, who had given his life for the company being treated like shit. Of all people I know how many late nights he had spent in that cabin of his going over the Transformer Designs. All of a sudden, the man who had yelled at me, scolded me, got angry at me, seemed so meek in front of the new Head. Sometimes, life sucks.

“I would like to meet all the members of the department one by one.” Sourabh declared.

After Ciggy's turn, it was the assistant managers who had to report to Sourabh. After all their introductions, which seemed more like stress interviews were done, it was my turn.

"May I come in?", I asked.

"Yeah," Sourabh answered.

He was reading something on his laptop.

"You have done some serious work in the last 3 years here," he said reading from the laptop.

"Thank you..."

"But I am sure you can work harder," he cut me.

"Sure."

"Good... You may go now."

I started to leave. But then decided to ask something.

"Sourabh, you were in St. Angel's weren't you?"

"Yeah, how do you know," he asked surprised.

“Oh... I was two years your junior. Devdutt Rastogi. Remember me?”

“No, I don’t.” He returned back to working on his laptop.

“Oh, its okay Sourabh, I wasn’t all that popular anyway.” I started to leave.

“Devdutt, I would appreciate it if you called me Mr. Mehrotra or sir.”

“Oh... ah... okay... sir.” I left.

I sat down at my desk - staring at the blank monitor on my desk. My phone rang.

It was Pallavi.

“Isn’t he handsome?”

“Hmm.”

“Fi-nuh-lly...”, she continued, “A hottie.”

“Is he that good?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me? He’s hot with a capital H. Heard, he is an IIM grad.”

“Hmm.”

Then she said something that stung me.

“Any girl would be lucky to have him.”

Few days went by. I realised Sourabh hadn't changed. He still bullied everyone who was below him and flirted with any girl he wanted. He flirted with Pallavi like there was no tomorrow, in spite of the fact that his girlfriend was within 50 metre radius.

Pallavi discussed about him with me.

"He said I was the prettiest girl he has ever met," she said.

I wanted to tell her that he had a girlfriend who was in the medical department 100 feet from the reception. Pritha had asked me not to tell anyone about the relationship between her and Sourabh to anyone in the office.

"You know how people talk," Pritha had told me.

Both of them took great care to keep safe distance between them. No one in the office knew, except me.

On a lazy Monday morning, one of the trainees who worked under me came up to me and whispered – “Coffee break big news.”

Everyone surrounded him excitedly. Even though I had no interest in gossip, I joined too. The trainee stood in the centre and everyone formed a circle around him. I stood on the outermost circumference, disinterested in whatever news he had to tell. He started speaking with wild hand gestures, like a magician does when he performs a magic trick.

“Guess, who I saw in Central mall yesterday?”

He continued without waiting for us to ask him.

“Our new manager sahib with his memsahib.”

“Whoa! That is big,” someone said.

“Nope, the big part is coming up,” he continued. “Guess who the memsahib is?”

“What? Do we know her?” someone asked.

“Yeah, it’s our doctor. Miss Pritha Bakshi.”

“What the? But it’s been just two weeks since he came here!” someone exclaimed.

“I know, she’s such a slut,” the trainee said sipping coffee. “I bet she’s giving our Manager some,” he said making hip movements.

That did it. I rushed into the centre held him by the collar and threw him on the wall.

“Whaaa?”, he yelled as I pushed him on another wall.

“Don’t you dare talk about her like that.”

Everyone stood at a metre distance from me. They had seen me shout but it never scared anybody. What I was doing now; scared the shit out of everyone. They looked at me with eyes as big as saucers.

I took a half day and left.

mmm

Chapter 9

Homeward bound

I reached my flat at around 1 pm. There was no one in the flat during this time of the day. I removed my shoes, threw them over the rack and sunk into my bed. For the first time in the last three years, I was missing my parents this bad. I wanted someone to be next to me, to comfort me, to let me know that everything will be alright.

It was time. I called up Ciggy and told him that I wanted to visit home. After the entry of Sourabh, Ciggy had grown soft, kinda uninterested in the job. He sanctioned my five day leave at one go. The old Ciggy would have done a lot of natak. The new Ciggy was least interested to throw his weight around.

I booked the next ticket on Vidarbha Express to Nagpur. And I left my worries behind.

I have done my schooling from Mumbai. My father worked as an Asst. Manager in the Bank of Gujarat. My mother was the Principal of IES High School. Both of them had retired last year and decided to leave Mumbai to live in the old family villa in the scenic outskirts of Nagpur. The villa was built by my grandfather in 1933 when Gandhiji came to live in the nearby Sewagram. Dad had to spend a little on the renovation, but it was completely worth it. I had fond memories of the place.

I remember the time I spent with my grandfather, my baba, in the villa when I was a kid.

“Faster baba... faster... vroom... vroom,” I pleaded him to push my blue tricycle faster.

“Arre your baba is an old man now,” he used to say panting but still pushing the tricycle.

I spent hours with him. I used to visit him during my summer vacations. Summers

in Nagpur are tar-meltingly hot. It was my baba's plan that we sleep on the terrace in the night. I used to love it.

"Baba story," I would demand.

"Hmm... which one?"

"Krishna... no... Rama..."

He would smile and start the story, and I would sink into deep slumber, under the twinkling stars.

He was no more now, I missed him.

I reached Nagpur station. I took an auto to the villa. My mom and dad were more than happy to see their son back home. Mom had cooked enough food to feed two mini-army teams.

"Take this baigan masala."

"Mom! That's it, I am full already. I already had three chappatis."

"You have become so thin. Take some more pulao then."

“Mom? You realise I am going to stay here for three days, right? You will have enough opportunity to fatten me up!”

My dad could just look at us and smile. To be honest, I enjoyed all the attention and the yummy fare mom had served me. My stomach was full, but my soul was still hungry for more.

The next few days were fun; dad and I talked about politics, cricket, my job, the degradation of Hindi songs and other stuffs. On the other hand, mom left no stone unturned to fatten me up as much as humanly possible in three days.

The days were fun, but the nights were not. Every night, Pritha's pretty face danced in front of my eyes, her sweet voice, her bubbly laughter, it didn't let me sleep. I used to spend a major part of the night on the terrace, trying to think about baba and the blue tricycle, the stories and the stars, but I

couldn't get her out of my head. Pritha is all that I could think of.

It was the last night that I was going to spend at my parents' home. I was going to return back to Pune the next day. I was up on the terrace, sitting on the parapet, gazing at the stars.

"Good night Dev." It was my dad. He came up to the terrace to wish me night every night.

"Good night dad." I said looking at him, giving him a weary smile.

He came close to me and sat on the parapet beside me.

"Who's the girl son?"

"Huh?" I was startled. Me and dad discussed science, politics, books, old Hindi songs, but like true gentlemen, we never discussed women.

"There is a girl for sure." he said. "Her thoughts don't let you sleep. You day-dream

about her. Only a girl can cause so much heartache.”

“Hmm.” It was no use lying to him. He knew me inside out. I came from him.

“What’s her name?”

“Pritha.. Pritha Bakshi.”

“Hmm... Pritha...,” dad said, trying to remember something.

“Yeah.... She was in my school. You must have seen her in Parent-Teachers meetings. I don’t think you remember her.”

“Pritha? Long hair and all? She shifted to Delhi, right?”

“DAD?”, I was amazed at how much he remembered about Pritha. He’s the same guy who forgets his purse almost every day when he goes out to buy milk in the morning.

“What? I have talked with her. I think she was in the 7th grade then. She topped the class, and I congratulated her. She graciously accepted. She’s a sweet girl.” I was amazed. This man would forget if he had lunch or not.

Then he jolted out with a shocker - “And besides, you think I would forget the girl my son so loved?”

“What? Dad? I didn’t love her.” I lied.

“No son, you did. As so did she.”

“How in the world...? What? I mean... How do you know?”, I went on blabbering confused as to why did my old man know so much about me and Pritha!

“I saw you two.”

“Saw us when?”

“Walking.”

“Oh! Back in the 8th grade?”

“Yeah... I saw it in your eyes... and her eyes. That was love son.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this time?” I asked confused.

“That it was love?”

“Nooo, that you saw me with her?”

“I thought why spoil it for you, you had things going with her. She was cute. Nice dark long hair, hazel eyes...”

“Dad? You seem to have developed a huge interest in her, she’s MINE okay!”

At that both of us laughed.

“If she’s yours, what’s the problem?” dad asked the million dollar question.

“She has a boyfriend.” I said, scratching the terrace floor with my toe nail.

“But she loves you.”

“Maybe back then she did, but now she likes this guy.”

“No mate, she will always love you. That’s how it works with girls,” he said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“So you think I still have a chance with this girl?”

“I think you yourself know the answer, else you wouldn’t have said –‘she’s mine!’”

I was amazed at the fundas my dad was dishing out.

“Don’t be me son...”, dad said as an afterthought.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“When I was doing my BA in economics, I fell in love with a girl, her name was Sugandha. Your girl, reminds me of her, and that is why I remember Pritha so vividly. You are like me Dev, in more ways than one, we have the same tastes, be it art, music or women.”

I was listening to him with my mouth open. It's weird knowing that your dad was in love once and that woman wasn't your mother.

“What happened to Sugandha?”, I asked.

“Well, her father got her married off to some rich guy,” my father said, staring at the terrace floor.

“Why didn't you ask for her hand first?” Everything seems so easy when you are on the other side of the problem.

“The circumstances didn't permit,” he said with a look of resignation. I didn't probe further. “That's why I say, don't be me son, fight fate, get back your girl.”

I had never seen my dad so animated. He was a cool guy; he never got angry... never ever. He never even slapped me when I was a kid. Leave aside slap; he didn't even raise his voice ever. I respected him for that. And I respected him for all that he told me about his love story especially because it was a failed one. It took guts to talk like that to your son.

"Who's the guy Pritha is with these days anyway?", dad asked out of the blue.

"Sourabh Mehrotra. He was two years my senior in school."

"Mehrotraaaa...", he said, "Is this the guy who is the mill owner Mehrotra's son?"

"Hmm... he's the one," I said, anger building up inside me.

"Isn't he the one who bullied you? He slapped you once, and you lied that you ran into a door," my dad went on with an exceptional nonchalance.

"Dad? You knew about that? Why didn't you do something about it?"

“A man has to fight his own battles, Dev.”

There was silence for a few seconds, it seemed like ages. Then dad spoke again.

“You know why I stayed as an Asst. manager at the bank all my life?”

“They didn’t offer you a promotion. You exposed some racket na?,” I had read about it in the papers when I was in high school. The news had made the third page. Gradually the matter cooled off and as it often happens in India, the culprits were left free.

“You know who the real culprit was, apart from the mentioned scapegoats in the newspapers?” I could sense his anger.

He had always kept us away from his personal problems.

“No, you never told me.” I said.

“Indrajit Mehrotra.”

“Sourabh’s dad?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah, that bastard. He ruined my career,” my dad thundered.

It felt weird hearing that word from my dad. He was a mild mannered guy. He must have been pushed and pushed for him to be so bitter.

“He and my manager together made sure that my promotion was stalled. Juniors by 10 years were promoted ahead of me. But it was my fight and I fought it on my terms. I lost. Don’t be me son, don’t be me.”

There was a hint of moisture in his eyes, a tear threatened to roll down his cheek. Fathers shouldn’t cry. Never in front of their sons. For a son, his father is his hero. It hurts to know that your hero is as human as you are. It hurt seeing him that weak. He excused himself and left. I decided to sleep on the terrace. My mom had placed a charpoy on the terrace for me. I lay on it awake, looking at the moon play hide and seek with the stars among the clouds. Sleep found my address, I found a mission.

mmm

Chapter 10

And now, it starts! Welcome to the Fight

I reached Pune. Dad's words kept swirling in my head. Don't be me. Don't be me. Fight. I lost.

"No dad, you didn't lose. The fight is still ON." I said to no one in particular.

I reached my flat in the evening. Kunal and Umesh had decided to spend the evening outside Fergusson College, leering at babes. Akshay was at home. For the first time in months he didn't have a date on Saturday night.

"Hey! You back! How was the trip?," Akshay asked.

"Good."

"How are uncle and aunty?" Akshay asked, with a nonchalance that was characteristic of him.

"They are good." I threw in some of my own nonchalance.

"Good. Good."

I was in no mood to talk. I was emotionally strained.

“Chips?,” Akshay thrust a pack of Lays in front of me. When men are out of topics to talk, they offer each other food or a beer.

“No thanks. Don’t feel like it,” I said.

Again a pause. It was getting uncomfortable. I admired Akshay, how amicable he was. No doubt he was good with girls. He was so cool. Which girl wouldn’t want to be with him? Shit, this is beginning to sound gay again.

“No date tonight?,” I broke the silence.

“No yaar. She cancelled today. You know, the thing before the woman thing,” he said.

“What thing?” I asked innocently. I knew what the girl thing was, but I had no idea about the thing that comes before that. They didn’t teach that in 12th standard biology.

“Arre yaar, you know; when they get all moody and stuff.”

“Ah yes.”

The truth is, I didn't know. Now I do, but back then I didn't know what happens to them and why it happens.

"I don't get girls yaar!" Akshay said the impossible.

"Yeah right! If you don't get girls what the rest of us can hope for?" there was dejection in my tone.

Akshay detected it. Thankfully.

"Hey! Dev! You haven't been yourself since the last few weeks yaar. No masti-mazak. No faltugiri. You talk less. In between, you were the happiest I have ever seen you, but since then it's been downhill for you," he continued. "Only a girl can cause so much happiness one day and so much sadness the next day. I didn't ask you earlier because I knew you would tell us when you felt the time was right. But you didn't, so I am asking you- who's the girl, Dev?"

I was amazed at how well Akshay knew me. It was almost as if he could see through

me. Now usually, I wouldn't open up to anyone. I liked to keep things to myself. But sometimes, a friend wants to help you so bad, you gotta give him a chance.

I told him my whole story.

"She is the only girl you loved?," Akshay asked with amazement in his eyes.

"Yeah. The one and only," I answered.

"You have always amazed me Dev. I was already impressed by the amount of hard work you put in your work, the things you do for your friends. And now this! I can never be like you."

Wow! It's weird, isn't it? Here I was, wanting to be like him and knowing for sure that I couldn't be him even in the next 100 years, and here, Akshay wanted to be like me!

"Aks, will you help me?" I asked Akshay.

"Help you do what?" Akshay asked, knowing what I was going to say next.

"Get my girl back."

Akshay touched his brow, as if contemplating something.

“Aks, you are the only guy who knows so much about girls. Teach me all there is to know. I love her. I want her.” I went on and on.

“Hmm... I will... subject to certain conditions.”

“What conditions?”

“One- You will have to promise me you won’t give up in between, two- you will agree to do whatever I say even if you find it non-collinear to your principles and philosophies in life and three- you won’t tell anyone what I told you. Deal?”

“Deal.”

We shook hands on that one.

But I am now breaking the deal; I am telling you whatever he told me.

“We start tomorrow morning. Be ready,” Akshay sounded like a tough coach.

Well, I was ready already.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let the fight begin.

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Chapter 11

Get your Dating Basics Right

Get up... will ya?

Someone shook me out of deep slumber.

“Huh? Whaat?”

“Get up, you ass, you want her or not?” It was Akshay.

“Whaat? Want whom?” Then I realised he was talking about Pritha. “What is the time?”

“4:30... Now, get up or I will throw a jug of water over you.”

“Fuck you.” I was angry that Akshay actually had the nerve to order me out of bed. It was a Sunday and he wanted me to get up at 4:30 a.m. I went back to sleep.

Splashhhh!

I woke up with a start. Akshay had splashed a whole jug full of cold water on me. I was dripping wet.

“When I say something at 4:30 in the morning, more often than not, I mean it.” Akshay growled.

Now I am not a sissy, not even close, but I swear to God, when he said that, I was very scared of him.

“Get in there,” Akshay ordered pointing at his room. I got up. Kunal was asleep with his pillow between his legs. Umesh was asleep; he had that tense expression on his face, implying that he didn’t have his morning quota yet. With my hair dripping wet, I entered Akshay’s room, half scared of what plans he had.

He came in hurriedly and bolted the room.

“Now look, I woke you up this early coz we have to do this before Umesh and Kunal wake up,” Akshay was almost whispering in my ear. Now I got really scared. Various dirty doubts started creeping in my head.

“Wait I have to show you something,” Akshay said excitedly.

At this point of time, I was scared to death. I contemplated running away from the room.

Akshay bent beside his bed to pull out something. I closed my eyes coz I was fucking scared.

“Here quick, have a look,” Akshay said. “What? Open your eyes. You will like it.”

With my eyes closed I said, “No Akshay, you got me wrong. I am not that kind.”

“What kind? Open your eyes idiot!”

I opened my eyes slowly. He held a white board in his hands. Phew! I wiped the sweat or was it water, dripping down my eyebrow.

“What’s gotten into you?” He said putting the white board on the wall. “I am not that kind, I am not that kind...,” he imitated me, “what’s gotten into you.”

I said nothing.

As an afterthought he said- “Wait... Wait a minute... You thought... You thought... You ass... You ass-hole. I am straight. I like girls.”

“What? You wake me up at 4 on a Sunday morning, tell me that you don’t want Kunal and Umesh to see it, what do I make of it?”

“You ass-hole...”

“Okay Okay... I am sorry.”

“You ass-hole.”

He must have said ‘asshole’ around 21 times after that. After he got it out of his system, Akshay said – “Let’s just forget that such a thing happened between us.”

“Shift Delete,” even during times like these, I couldn’t stop being a nerd.

“Hmm... good. Now we can begin.”

He took a blue marker in his hand and wrote the word ‘Attttraction’ on the white board. He put in 4 ‘t’s in the word.

“What is attraction?” Akshay had taken the role of the coach pretty seriously. He

stood near the white board while I sat on his bed trying to come up with an answer.

“Err...err... love?” It was more of a question than an answer.

“Nope. First get your basics right,” Akshay seemed angry with my answer, “I don’t know what love is, and I don’t care to find out, but attraction I know. And that’s all I will teach you.”

I was impressed. This guy knew his job.

“Imagine a shelf- with 10 laptops, 9 of them are matt white, and one is metallic black, which one will you pick?” Akshay put forth a nerdy problem. “All of them are free by the way,” he added as an afterthought.

Akshay knew me, the subject of laptops interested me.

“Hmm... I will pick the metallic black,” I said, happy at the prospect of getting a free laptop!

“That my dear friend is attraction. You were attracted by the black laptop. Did you

even care to ask me the specifications? What if it turns out that the metallic black has a Pentium 2 machine inside?”

I just looked at him. He continued the gyan.

“And what if the machine has a Core 2 duo, comes packed with a graphic card, 8 ports, is wi-fi enabled and had 4 GB of RAM and 520 MB of hard...”

“I will fall in love with it,” I exclaimed cutting him in between.

Akshay took a deep breath.

“EXACTLY,” he said. “The first step is always Attraction. You will have to attract her to you. After she knows you are a Core 2 Duo with blah-blah RAM and stuff, she will fall in love with you. But before that you have to be the metallic black laptop.”

“How?” I asked. I was beginning to get real interested in all this.

Akshay went up to the white board and wrote in bold blue letter –

Step 1: Looking Good.

I didn't get it. Now I was no Hrithik Roshan but I looked okay. My mom thought I look quite dapper when I wear black.

At around 9, after breakfast Akshay literally dragged me out, took out his Honda and off we went to Central mall.

I rarely shop for clothes. I don't have a huge wardrobe. I don't find it necessary. Now let me explain to you how I shop, if at all I do that is. I go through all the shirts that are up on display. If I like the shirt, I look for its price tag. If it's too costly—read in more than 500—I give up on that shirt no matter how good it looks on me.

Akshay, however had a different way of shopping.

Akshay went on a rampage inside the mall, pulling out anything he thought will look good on me. The weird part was that never did he stop to check the price. I tried 27 shirts that day, that's more than all the

shirts I owned in the last 5 years. Akshay stood patiently outside the changing room, passing me a head to toe glance and asking me to do a 360 degree turn, before approving or rejecting any shirt. In the end we settled down on 6 shirts. Much to my nature and Akshay's amusement I started checking the price tags. I came across a tag – Rs.1300/- . Whoa! That's costly, I thought to myself. On the other side of the tag was written – Arrow shirts – 30% discount.

I called a pretty salesgirl who was standing in the men's section since the time we came in. I wanted to be doubly sure about the discount before committing.

“Yes, sir,” she said sweetly.

“Umm, is there a 30% discount on this shirt?”

She gave the price tag a customary glance and then said sweetly,

“Yes sir. We have 30% discount on all Arrow shirts.”

“Hmm... Thanks.”

Then as an afterthought, she added-

“I think you should buy the shirt sir, I think it would look really nice on you.”

I was happy to hear that from a girl, I never get compliments from any girl. But she had to ruin it- “You would look very handsome in it, I think your...err... partner... will agree,” she said pointing at Akshay.

Akshay who was still busy going through more shirts paused and looked at me in amusement. I shifted my gaze from him to the girl –

I went -“No no no... Me and him, no no... we are not partners... we are just friends... no... no... not partners.”

“Oh, I am sorry sir, it’s just that... err... never mind.”

She left us, she was embarrassed, we were embarrassed, and the people who had to hear this were also embarrassed.

Akshay, visibly dejected, came up to me and said – “What was that about?”

“She thought we were, like, partners... you know... like... gay.”

“Yeah I know. I mean what was that no-no-no about? What? I am not good enough for you?”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean that... err... you are a great guy...umm... why are we even having this conversation?”

“Yeah... good point... Shift Delete this one too.”

And that was it.

Then we went for a haircut. It wasn’t much of a haircut. A few snips here, a few snips there and that was it. We went to Akshay’s parlour- the kind where they wear gloves when they cut your hair and charge you for the cut and the gloves, how else do you explain Rs. 150 for the cut?!

Akshay whispered something into the barber's ears- wait, "the hairstylist's ear," I meant.

The hairstylist brought out a bunch of tubes and silver foils, he tucked me neatly under a silk sheet and started applying colour.

"You will look like Shah Rukh Khan, I tell you," Akshay showed me a magazine he was reading with SRK's photo on the cover.

After 30 mins, my hair was washed, and they showed streaks... nice subtle streaks. My hair looked, well, wow!

Slowly and steadily, I was warming up.
mmm

Chapter 12

Being Khool!

"Good morning, Pallavi," I said as I entered the reception area.

"Good morning Dev." She kept looking at my new shirt and my new haircut as I passed by her to the stairs.

“Dev! Wait!”

I stopped, looked over my shoulder to her.

“You...you look different.”

I smiled... and continued climbing up the stairs.

That morning, Akshay had again woke me up at 4:30 a.m. This time I didn't act smart. I got up, directly went in the Akshay's room – hence forth referred to as – “the coaching chamber”. I sat on his bed in the coaching chamber, ready to learn new things.

Akshay took out the blue marker and wrote in bold letters – BE KHOOL.

“Be what?” I was very particular about spellings. I always topped my English exams in school.

“Khoollll... as in coooool,” Akshay explained.

“Why to be that?” I ask too many questions.

“Hmm... Do you want her or not?”

“I do.”

“Then BE KHOOL”

“How to be cool? What is cool?”

Akshay was pleased to have such an inquisitive student. He began his gyan.

“You see, being cool is being yourself! Being content with what you are. Not wanting to be somebody else. Being relaxed, you know?”

I didn't know.

“At peace with yourself man!” Akshay closed his eyes, as if meditating.

“But that is difficult,” I said.

“Of course it is. Nothing is easy. It requires a lot of hard work to accept you the way you are. Having ambition is a must, but being miserable when you don't achieve that ambition sucks. Success and failure should have the same effect on you. A question – What happens when someone compliments you on your work?”

“I become happy,” I said after a pause, I was just too impressed by his speech.

“You become very happy... Nothing wrong with that but then what happens when Ciggy, that’s your boss’ name, right? So what happens when he shouts at you and lets you know what a low life form you are, and how insignificant you are to the ecosystem?”

The truth is, Ciggy has never been that nasty to me. But I didn’t want to spoil Akshay’s flow, so I chose to treat it as a hypothetical question and answered -

“I feel dejected.”

“Not just dejected, you don’t eat your lunch properly that day.”

I was amazed, how in the world did he know that! I hadn’t told that to anyone. Maybe he might have noticed it at dinner sometime. What a judge of character!

“You Dev, are uncool! You have to be detached. You have to be confident. You have to be Khool!”

He was drilling things into my head. All that made sense to me. I was too bothered by my surroundings. I have to be more intrinsic. I have to be Khool!

That day I kept myself detached from everything. The first thing that I did was to send an apology letter to the trainee whom I had hurled on the wall before I left for Nagpur. I also sent him a Cross pen which I knew he will like. On receiving these items he came up to me and said,

“Hey, look, I am sorry Dev. I shouldn’t have talked about her like that. Hope we are cool.”

To which I said – “I am cool.”

During lunch, I sat alone. Pallavi came with her plate to my table.

“May I?”

Now we were good friends and all, but our lunch timings varied so much that we never eat lunch together. Also it’s difficult to have lunch with a girl in a company with a

sex ratio of 1:47. People need a reason to talk. But she asked me if she could join and I couldn't say no to that.

“So, Mr. Dev, wazzup?”

Calling me Mr. Dev was her way of letting me know that she's gonna take my case.

“Nothing special. You say.”

“You... you look so different. New haircut, stylish clothes...kya baat hai!”

“They weren't stylish before?” I asked with a hint of mischief.

“Err... no, I mean, they were but...”

“But?”

I was taking her case now. I was amazed with myself. I had never been this relaxed with a girl ever.

“But... as in... I meant you look good.”

“Thanks. You look good too.”

“Noooo, you look different...you look...you look...”

“Cool?” I offered to finish her sentence.

“Yes!” she cried. “That's the word – cool!”

I smiled.

In the evening, I took a bus ride home. I wanted to let Akshay know how cool I had been today. I knew Akshay wouldn't be home. So I messaged him all the happenings in long 3 part message. Akshay messaged me back.

“Dude? 3 part msg r so uncool. B a man. Finish evrythin u gotta say in 1 msg. Ok? N cntrl ur emotions. Wat did I tell u bout being khool? ”

I don't know if it was Akshay's good natured vanity or something else but that made me blurt a laugh. An aunty sitting next to me in the crowded bus, looked at me like I had lost my marbles, but I couldn't stop laughing.

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Chapter 13

Act like it's not gonna work out

Akshay didn't have to wake me up now, I got up myself. I set the alarm for 4:30 instead of 6 everyday.

I had once asked Akshay whether he was a Morning Person or a Night Owl, to which he had replied –

“Morning Owl, Night Person!”

But since the last few days, he had been taking great efforts to get up early to impart me the gyan that I so needed.

I directly headed to the “coaching chamber”. I entered his room and bolted the door. I didn't like him bolting the door, it gave the whole thing a very climatic feel, like something was about to happen. But I assure you, nothing was about to happen. I took a seat on his bed. As on cue, Akshay got up and stood beside the white board.

He scribbled on the white board with his blue marker – Act as if it's not gonna work out.

“What's not gonna work out?” I asked.

“Your thing with Pritha,” he answered coolly.

“What? Why not?” I was on the verge of breaking down. Akshay saying it won’t work meant it won’t work. Or maybe it meant I didn’t deserve a girl like her...

“Read the board again,” I hate it when Aks gets all coach-like. “Read what is written.”

“Act as if...,” I started reading.

“ACT! ACT!” he cut me in between...

“Oh!”

“Yeah, genius. How did you manage an 8.3 GPA?” Akshay was cranky.

Truth be told, I worked hard for that 8.3, I studied for 13 hours straight, everyday, day after day during my term exams. Akshay had a GPA of 7.9, a decent GPA, but considering the fact that he never really studied for his exams was an indication of how generous mother-nature had been with him while blessing him with brains.

"I am sorry. I am sleepy. I didn't read the full sentence," I managed to say.

"I am sorry too. I slept late. Didn't get enough sleep, I am not in the groove," Akshay said, realising he was too harsh on me.

"We can do it some other time," I said.

"NO," Akshay growled. "We are doing this now. So where was I?"

"Act as if it's..."

"Yeah, act as if it's not gonna work out. Tell yourself that this relationship with her is not going to work. And tell her that too...How? Through your actions!"

"But why? I don't see the need for that."

"Do you want her or not?" This had begun to be Akshay's favourite phrase. He used it whenever he wanted me to shut up.

"Yes."

"Good."

"But still, what is the need for all this." I had scored good marks all my life, one of the

primary reasons for that had been my ability to ask questions shamelessly.

“Damn you Dev. If you want an explanation, here goes-

You were khool in front of Pallavi yesterday? Right? Imagine Pritha in her place. Same place, same time, same conversation. I would be damned if you could be that cool in front of her. I would like you to finish the remaining part of the explanation -”

I stared at him, this man was bang on! I started mumbling-

“So... so... you mean... I was cool with Pallavi because I don't want her and I know nothing will work out between me and her. But it will be very difficult to be like that in front of Pritha, things get messy there because there are feelings involved.”

“Dude! You make me proud,” Akshay said mockingly thumping his chest.

We laughed at that. Akshay continued the gyan.

“Look Dev, sometimes we guys go overboard and come on too strong on our special girl. We try too many things at the same time. This scares them.”

I remembered how strong I came onto Pritha at our first couple dates. No doubt she was turned off. Akshay continued-

“My request to you is – take it slooow. I know it is difficult, especially for you, you have been waiting for her all your life, and now you can’t wait to tell her how much you want her, but it doesn’t work like that mate. Women are a complex breed.”

He went on with the monologue.

“You will have to tell yourself to go slow, and you will have to make her feel comfortable. Last time when you met her, you sounded like a dog in heat – Nagpur heat or do you want me to say Delhi heat?”

“Hehehe... Let’s keep our hometowns out of this...” We engineers find jokes like that funny.

“Heh heh ... Right. But I hope you get what I am trying to tell you. Be with Pritha like you are with Pallavi. You being relaxed is a pre-requisite to you being khool which in turn is important for Pritha to be attracted to you.”

Akshay had a date last night; he came home late, slept late and then woke up at 4:30. For the last hour or so, he had been giving me a lecture on how to behave around my girl. He looked weary and was yawning after every 5 minutes. I had no idea why he was helping me.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“Doing whaaayaawn?” Akshay yawned.

“This! Getting up early to give me pointers on how to get my girl?”

“You really wanna know?”

“Yes.”

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Chapter 14

Akshay's story

Note: I take the liberty of breaking the chronology of events to tell Akshay's story. I think it's really important for you to know him.

"You really wanna know?"

"Yes."

"When I was a teenager, Dad's chemical business was booming. I had things easy in life. I had enough pocket money to buy stuff. I always had the newest gadgets, hand held video games, costly watches, and funky clothes. That made me popular, among guys and of course- girls. It's easy to get girls when you don't actually need them. Note that I said need, and not want, for there is no man, who doesn't want women.

When I was in the 12th standard at DPS, Delhi, I found out something about myself. I found out that I was a hottie. Yes. Yes. By the way, I always knew I was awesome. But girls finding me irresistible was new to me. With raging hormones inside me, I jumped at any

chance I had with them. It was like a game. How many could I charm? How many would remember me as the first in their lives. It was a game, for me, for the girls I dated, it was anything but that. Women are a complex breed I tell you Dev. I would get bored with one girl pretty easily and would jump to the next and then the next. I must have broken a lot of teenage hearts. And I am ashamed of that. But once you get addicted, there is no way out Dev. It is like when you play counterstrike. You just wanna go on and on.”

I was amazed at his ability to explain things. He made sure that I understood how he felt by mentioning counterstrike.

“I went on and on, till I found Anjali. Anjali was a junior to me in school. She was lovely. Her smile made my heart skip a beat. The way her nose wrinkled when she smiled. She would laugh at the silliest of jokes. I would make a fool out of myself just so that I could hear her laughter. It was amazing Dev.

I wanted her. But not “wanted” in the way I wanted other girls. I “needed” her. This time it was intense. You know when you want to take a girl home to your parents? Show her off? Be proud of her? I wanted to do that. And I would have, had Dad taken some time off from business or had Mom taken some time off her social work.”

I felt sorry for him. The guy had everything, but he was short on love. I suddenly felt a strong desire to hug him, comfort him. But men take time to grant that privilege to their friends. Somehow, I felt I hadn’t earned that privilege yet.

“She was a nice girl. Anjali... It’s such a lovely name, isn’t it? I don’t know what love is, but I think it must be very close to what I had for Anjali. She wasn’t like other girls. I think she didn’t even find me hot enough. Or maybe she didn’t want me to know that she did. I had to pursue her a lot. Old fashioned style. Flowers, chocolates, you know...”

“Yes, I know...” The truth is that I didn’t know. I had never been with a girl ever.

“Once she was mine, the world was quite a place to live in. Initially, I used to fight with my parents, a lot. Whatever little time we spent together, we fought. But after she came in, I was too happy to fight with my parents or anyone. Spending time with her was the only thing I wanted to do. I was high 24x7. I didn’t really care for any other girl. I didn’t care for who found me hot and who didn’t. I was ready to give this relationship everything I had.”

I was amazed. I didn’t think Akshay can fall in love. Anyone who had seen him with a different girl every three weeks would find it difficult to believe. As an afterthought, Akshay asked –

“You know what the national average age for people to lose their virginity?”

“25 years?” I said.

It was more of a question, than an answer. If you ask me the average velocity of sound in air, I will answer you, but such questions I have no idea. I tried to use my age as a parameter. I was 25, and I didn't do it yet. There's a fair chance that people all around the country decided to be as chaste as me. Or in other words, I hoped they were as big losers as I am.

Akshay let out a sympathetic laugh.

"No, it is 17 years."

He continued....

"It was Diwali. We had a celebration in school. She was all decked up. Blue lengha-choli, anklets and green and blue bangles, she looked beautiful. I took her home in my Maruti Zen. I had a Zen back then; my dad gifted me the car on my 17th birthday. I didn't even had a proper license, but my dad knew the ACP, so it wasn't a problem.

I wanted her to meet mom and dad. But Dad left for a meeting in Baroda that

morning. Mom wasn't there at home. She was probably attending some function for some underprivileged kids. The house was empty. Imagine that, an empty house on Diwali! In all her social work for underprivileged kids, somehow my mother failed to notice that; maybe, I was the one who was the most underprivileged. I felt bad about promising Anjali that I would introduce her to my parents on Diwali. All I introduced her to was my empty house."

"She must have seen the disappointment in my eyes. She held me close to her. I broke down. Just like that. All the pain inside me came out flowing through my eyes. She let me cry. It's tough being a boy yaar. We are always taught it's not cool to cry. We are perceived to be weak when we cry. But in front of her, it was okay to cry. I took her to my room upstairs. I held her close, I loved her. I filled her with me. It was beautiful."

I was spellbound. Akshay was pouring his heart out to me.

“Then, what went wrong?” I asked.

“My past caught up with me.”

“What... what happened?” I asked, puzzled.

“Just when I thought I had found the girl I would spend my life with, all hell broke loose. There was this girl Malini, I had dumped her unceremoniously a year ago. She was bitter. She wanted to patch up with me ever since we broke up. After Anjali came into my life, I had gone around apologising to girls whose hearts I had broken. Most of them had accepted my apologies. But Malini hadn't. She was set on making my life miserable.”

“What did she do?”

“She sent out an MMS of me kissing a girl.”

“What's wrong with you asshole? Why did you kiss another girl, you had Anjali!!

And you ass, you had the nerve to make a video of that?"

"Arre I didn't kiss anyone and I didn't make any video. You really think I am that mind fucked? It was a poor video, those days we had really poor camera phones. The girl's face wasn't visible, and even the guys face was only partially visible. And he looked a bit like me. But only bits like me. I am sure if that guy came face to face with me, you guys will find no similarities. But in the video, he did look a bit like me. Malini passed the MMS around, knowing my reputation with girls; everyone believed it was me who was cajoling that girl. But it wasn't me yaar... The clip found its way to Anjali. She was heart-broken. I kept telling her that it wasn't me.

'All my friends had warned me about you. But I didn't listen to them. You don't deserve me Akshay,' that's all she said. She didn't pay any heed to my pleadings. She didn't get any of the logic about Malini being mad at me

and wanting to tarnish my image. She just left, stopped taking my calls, stopped talking to me, she didn't even meet friends who were common between us. She cut off all ties. I was angry. I got off girls; I had nothing to do with them. I couldn't handle the hurt. I studied hard to get an admit from a college outside Delhi. I got into BITS, Pilani. Even there I had a tough time nursing my broken heart. But then I realised that it wasn't working. The hurt just won't go. I was mad, and got back to my old ways. If she thought I wasn't worth for her then she wasn't worth for me either. And since then I am doing what I have been doing. I don't derive any pleasure out of dating these girls. But they keep my mind off her. I still hope Anjali will come along one day, and things will be alright. Sometimes I feel life is overrated; I just hope it gets better."

Akshay was emotionally drained. I could see he hadn't discussed this with anybody till

now. I always had Dad to talk about stuff, but he didn't even have his dad. He had all the girls he wanted, but he was still alone. Sucks, doesn't it?

"This is my way of penance. I am trying to come good. I am helping you to get your girl so that in some way it will wash away my sins. It will balance things out. And who knows one day, it will give me my girl back. Dev, I am helping you get your Anjali, for one day, I am sure, I am gonna get mine."

I looked at the watch, it was 5:50. In sometime it would be Umesh's time for his early morning dump. Since Akshay wanted me not to let anyone know about him coaching me (one of the three conditions of the deal), I went to sleep in my bed. I would get up at 6:30, bang the loo door, curse Umesh's family tree, take a bath, go to the loo, dress up in Akshay's room, take my laptop bag and leave. The act would go perfectly; Umesh and Kunal wouldn't have the slightest idea what I

have been doing since 4:30. And that's how we wanted it to go.

mmm

Chapter 15

Implementing the Strategy

The bus dropped me outside VW Electric bus stop. I started walking towards the reception area. Just then Pritha got down from a rickshaw, she looked beautiful. Her hair was slightly wet and she had kept them open. Girls do that to dry their hair. When guys come to office with wet hair, they end up looking, like, ugly. I was entering the reception as she was getting out of the rickshaw, I don't think she saw me.

“Good morning Pallavi.”

“Good morning Dev. How are you?”

“I was okay till now, but after seeing you, I am good.”

“What re!” She said blushing slightly.

I was amazed at my guts. Now I know the line is cheesy, but it still takes guts,

especially for a guy like me, to say something like that. I was pleased with the courage I had shown.

“Good morning, Dev.”

It was a stern ‘Good morning’. I turned back half expecting to see Pritha. I hoped she had heard our conversation, her ‘Good morning’ definitely sounded like she had heard what I wanted her to hear.

“Good morning, Pritha.”

I made an exit before she could ask me anything. I saw her eyes follow me as I made a move towards the stairs.

We get a tea break around 10 am. I wanted to see Pritha. In the morning, in my attempt to make her realise that it wasn’t going to work out between us, I didn’t get to pay attention to her hair. Lovely, dark brown hair... I would love to get lost in her deep tresses. I knew she came to the first floor to have tea around 10 am. There was a small passage between our design office and the

tea room. I stood in the passage, reading The Times of India.

And then she came, her soft steps, not making the slightest noise, as if she was walking on a film of soft foam. Her open hair had a mind of its own.

“Hey Dev!”

“Hi Pritha!”

“Care for some tea?”

You can replace the word tea by milk, coffee, juice, Osama bin Laden... If she asks that sweetly, you can only answer her in one word,

“Sure!”

We entered the tea room. I filled two cups, gave one to her.

“You seemed busy in the morning,” the sternness returned to her tone. I was enjoying every bit of it. At the same time, I wanted to give up this farce, I wanted to let her know then and there that I wanted her for life, that I wanted to wake up to her pretty face every

day, that I wanted to make babies with her. But I decided not to. That wasn't the way to get her.

“Oh! That? A client in Germany was waiting yaar...” To be honest, no client was waiting in Germany or any other part of the world.

“Hiee!”

Someone tapped on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Pallavi.

I wanted to tell her that I can't talk to her right now coz I was talking with the prettiest girl in the world.

“Hi Pallavi! What brings you here?” I asked.

“Tea! What else makes one visit the tea room?!”

I almost forgot I was in the tea room. Pritha always made me numb to my surroundings.

I continued my act.

“Pallavi, those are nice earrings,” I said noticing her blue earrings. “You have never worn them before, are they new?” The truth is, I had no idea if she had worn those before or not, I had never noticed. I made a guess about the new part.

“Wow! You noticed!” she said, touching her earrings.

“They are very pretty.” I gave extra importance to the word ‘very’.

Pritha glared at me. I looked at her and she averted her gaze.

“So Dev, how was your stay back home?” Pallavi asked.

“Oh... it was fun! I must have gained five pounds at least.”

“Well, doesn’t look like that, you look very dapper.” Pallavi added.

Pritha was finding this subtle flirting very difficult. She quickly added, “How are uncle and aunty?”

“They are good. In fact, they were asking about you, Pallavi...,” I tried hard to make Pallavi sound important.

“Really? They know about me?” Pallavi asked with genuine surprise.

“Oh! Of course! They really like you. I talk about you to them all the time...”

The truth is, they didn't have the slightest idea about Pallavi. I felt bad lying to her. She was a good friend. Speaking of friend, Pritha had a tough time wondering how deep my friendship with Pallavi was. Pritha was finding all this very weird. She took one or two sips of her tea and left.

Now, I and Pallavi were alone in the tea room.

“So, someone's trying to make someone jealous,” Pallavi said with a hint of mischief in her tone.

Obviously the first someone was me and the second someone was Pritha.

“Am I?” I asked.

“Aren’t you?”

“Maybe...” I was trying very hard to sound cool and mysterious and stuff. “Is it working?”

“Maybe.”

Pallavi bit into a Marie biscuit.

“Your parents don’t even have a clue about me!”

“Yeah, sorry I lied there.” I said with my poor guy vulnerable look. I have this characteristic look which Aks helped me develop. This is how it goes – You have to put your hands in your pocket, shrug your shoulders and tilt your head. It works every time.

“Awww... no problem jaar. I can see you have a plan.”

She was so good to me. I wanted to tell her everything about Pritha and Sourabh. I wanted to tell her what a snake of a guy

Sourabh was. I remembered how Pallavi melted at a compliment Sourabh had given her. I wanted to tell her that he already had a girlfriend and it was wrong of him trying to flirt with her. But Pritha had asked me to promise her that I will not tell anyone about her relationship with Sourabh. So I couldn't let that information out. But I could still warn her.

“Pallavi, please be careful with Sourabh.”

“Why?” she asked sipping her tea. “He seems to be a nice guy.”

“Hmm... I don't know yaar... just be careful.”

“I can take care of myself re...Don't you worry.”

And that was that.

I returned back to work. A Tech-audit was coming up and I had to make sure everything was in order. There were a few meetings in the next few days. Sourabh was to head most of them. He was going through

past records and files, trying to make sure there was no discrepancy.

He called me into his cabin.

“May I come in?”

“Enter. So...Mr. Dutt, you are in charge of connections, bushing and tank fittings? Why are there so many discrepancies in your records?”

“Err... sir, I am not responsible for the tank fittings, Mr. Sinha is responsible for them. And as far as I know, all the records regarding connections and bushing are perfect.”

“That is for me to check, alright?” Sourabh snarled.

“Yes, sir.”

“What is with the localisation of bushings and connections?”

“Sir, till last year we used to buy all our components from Germany, now I have localised the components, we buy stuff from our suppliers in India.”

“What do you mean ‘I have localised’? Who gave you the authority?”

“I asked Ciggy.”

“Who?”

“Oh, I mean, I asked Mr. Shankaran. He gave me the authority.”

“And who the fuck gave him the authority?”

“I... I... Sir, he was the head of Design then,” I was a little taken aback at the mention of the F word by him.

“Who is the head now?” He asked, relaxing back into his chair.

“Sir, you are...”

“What am I?”

“The Design head.”

“Which company?”

“Von Wahl Electric.”

“I am the Design Head Asia Operations... Do you get it? I am the only one who can give you authority if you are on this fucking continent. Get it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Louder...!” he raised his voice.

“Yes... sir... ”

“Who are our suppliers by the way?”

“Baroda electricals for bushing and Advancetech Steels for connections.”

“From now on we will buy stuff from Shanti steel and electricals.”

“Why?”

“Cause I said so.”

“Shanti steel and electricals doesn't have a very good reputation sir.” It was true. It had been involved in cheating its customers. Its quality was questionable and its prices unreasonable.

“I am more concerned about reputation than you are,” he snarled.

“But sir, we have spent a lot of time standardising. We will have to do it all over again. It's a lot of work.”

“Of course it is work. Why else do you get paid?”

It wasn't fair. I spent over three months standardising components. He wanted me to do it again. And that too for a company who had a really bad reputation.

"I think our work is done here Mr. Dutt. You may leave."

"My name is... never mind."

I moved out of his cabin, my blood boiling in my veins. I sank into my chair. Sat staring at the blank screen. Just then the phone on my desk rang.

"Hello," I growled.

"Hel...Hello... Dev?" It was Pritha. She was taken aback.

"Oh... yes... Pritha..."

"Are you alright?" She asked. She must have sensed the stress in my voice.

"Yes. I am. What is this regarding?" I was angry at her too. How could she find a guy as nasty as Sourabh likeable?

"This is regarding Mr. Pravin Amble. He is a trainee under you, right?"

“What about him?” I asked angrily. I hated myself for talking to her like that.

“He was absent on the day of checkup. Can you please ask him to visit me today, say around 3:30?”

“Sure...” I was about to keep the phone, when out of nowhere, a question popped into my head. “You free Sunday night?”

“Huh? Umm... no Dev, I have a date.”

“Cancel it.”

I don't know if it was an ego thing or if I was just too mad at Sourabh, but I just said it. Just like that.

Had she said – No - this book would have ended here. But she didn't say no.

“Umm... uh... okay.”

“Good. I will send Pravin to meet you.”

“Okay. Bye.”

mmm

Chapter 16

Love will Triumph

It was a Wednesday morning. I reached office early. We had the testing of the Bengal Electricity Board 100 MVA transformer. I was the project manager for that transformer. Now in most Indian transformer companies, it's the Testing Department which overlooks the testing of the transformer, but VW Electric, being a German company, for some unknown reason, found the presence of the Design Project manager, while the transformer was tested, super important.

Sourabh wanted us to test and approve this transformer before the audit. He had rearranged the deadlines. Now according to the renewed deadlines, the transformer was to be tested and approved in this week, instead of next week. On the shop-floor, things were on like crazy. Technicians were working over-time to get this thing completed.

I won't go into the specifics, but testing involves applying high voltage across the

windings of the transformer. When the high voltage test is to be carried out, the transformer, which is roughly the size of a BEST bus, is encircled by a yellow strip with the words – Test in Progress, on it.

That Wednesday morning, when I reached the shop floor, the technicians were working at frantic speed. Testing in VW Electric takes three days; there was only one way they were going to finish testing in this week—they had to work with frantic speed. But as usually happens in such scenarios, the correct process, if it is time consuming, is not followed. The same happened here. The Testing engineer, Mr. Ghosh, didn't even care to put the yellow strip around the transformer.

“Shouldn't we put the strip?” I asked.

“I don't tell you how to design; you don't tell me how to do testing...” Ghosh snapped back. Not his mistake, Sourabh must have been breathing down his neck all these days.

Ghosh found it appropriate to vent his frustration on someone from his department.

The testing was carried out in Bay 4. Bay 4 had two doors through which you could enter. One door was connected to the office and the other one was connected to Bay 3. We stood near the door which was connected to the office. All the apparatus was connected.

Mr. Ghosh turned on the apparatus.

First he tested the high voltage winding. High voltage was applied. I waited with bated breath. Success here would imply that the design was okay. The apparatus showed a perfect sine curve. PASS flashed on the LCD screen of the Tesing apparatus. The Test was a success. But it was only half over. The low voltage test had to be undertaken. Ghosh applied low voltage across the windings. Then a scream... Aggrrrhgh... The apparatus showed a surge in voltage, then a sudden dip. I turned off the apparatus without waiting for

the FAIL sign to flash on the screen. I rushed in the direction of the scream. It came from behind the transformer.

There was blood on the white epoxy flooring. A technician, in his blue uniform, was lying in a pool of blood. He had his back facing us. I rushed ahead to ask if he was alright. I bent to see his face; it was Joga Singh, senior Technician.

“Someone call Dr. Pritha Bakshi,” Ghosh said.

I called her.

“Pritha? Dev. Emergency. Bay 4.”

Pritha came rushing to Bay 4. Someone called an ambulance. Joga was bleeding profusely. Pritha checked him.

“He will not make it till Centurion,” Pritha said. Centurion was the hospital VW Electric had a tie up with. Centurion was in Pune city,

30 km away from our office. Pritha was tense. I was amazed seeing her worried for

someone she didn't even know. Being a resident doctor it was her job, I know, but still, she had that quality about her. She didn't look at patients like they were projects which went bad or machines which needed oiling.

I called Akshay.

"Hey."

"Hey dude! What happened? Forgot your keys? Heh heh."

I usually called Akshay only when I forgot the keys of our flat.

"Akshay, it's an emergency. What is the name of that female friend of yours?"

"Girlfriend?"

"No, Female friend. That doctor."

"Oh, Neha?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah. What happened?"

"She works at Aastha Hospital, right?"

"Yes. Dude? What's the matter? You alright?"

“I am fine. Call her and let her know that Dr. Pritha is bringing a patient. Casualty.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

“Call me again when you get time, alright?”

“Yeah.”

Aastha was the closest hospital to our office. Dr. Neha worked at Aastha. Dr. Neha was Akshay's only lady friend, as in, the only lady who didn't fall for him. Last year, Akshay was hospitalised for jaundice.

Dr. Neha was his doctor. I had met her when I paid Akshay a visit at Aastha Hospital. She was very pretty. If I have to compare her to an actress, I would say she looked a lot like yesteryear's Madhubala. Akshay tried hard to woo her, as hard as one can in a hospital, but she wasn't impressed. By Akshay's own admission, she was the only girl, in all his life, whom he couldn't impress. I derived that a man's wooing abilities go down big

time when his skin becomes yellow. Akshay couldn't impress her enough to make her date him, but she liked him enough to be good friends with him.

"Pritha, take him to Aastha. You will find Dr. Neha there."

"Come with me. Please."

"Okay."

It was Pritha's first emergency case. She was sweating. Her kameez clung to her wet back.

"Everything will be fine," I managed to tell her.

We got into the ambulance.

"Aastha hospital," I told the driver.

Tears rolled down Pritha's cheeks. Silent tears. She didn't even utter a sob. I let her cry. It's amazing that even eight years of Medical school doesn't prepare you for such scenarios. To be honest, I don't think any amount of training can prepare you for this. When you know your one decision can be the

difference between life and death for some guy, you are bound to get nervous. When I look back on the incident, I wonder why I had been so calm. It might have been because I thought the injury wasn't that serious. Or maybe I was the one who had foreseen the danger. I had told Ghosh about it. Maybe now I saw myself as someone who made the right decision and maybe that is why I was calm. Or maybe I was calm only so that Pritha would feel comforted.

We reached the hospital in five minutes. I rushed into the Casualty ward and found Dr. Neha waiting for me. She got up as soon as she saw me and we started running towards the ambulance.

"Is there anything I should know?" She asked running.

"He hurt his head. He is bleeding profusely," I answered trying to catch up with her pace.

By the time we reached the ambulance, the assistants had laid Joga on the stretcher and were moving him into the Trauma centre.

“Doctor Neha, Doctor Pritha.” I introduced them.

“I know. Akshay called me.” Neha said. “Doctor, I will need you to assist me. I am short on staff.”

“I will,” Pritha managed to answer.

Both of them entered the Trauma centre. I was asked to sit outside. After two hours, Neha came out.

“He is out of danger. But we will have to keep him under intensive care tonight.”

“I understand. I will wait here tonight,” I said.

Just then Pritha came out of the Trauma centre.

“Doctor Pritha, we are understaffed, so I need you to be here tonight,” Neha told her.

“Yes doctor, I will be here.” She managed to say.

Neha left. Pritha came and sank into a chair next to mine. She looked tired. I went to the canteen and bought a Mangola. I gave it to her. She gulped it down.

“Thank you.” She said, dabbing her lips with a tissue.

“You are welcome.” I said.

“Thank you,” she said looking into my eyes.

“Err... You already...”

“I meant for coming here with me.” She interrupted me.

“Oh... Well, I know you would do something like that if I needed you to.”

“You are a nice guy, Dev.”

“Hmm... and at exactly what point did you realise that?”

She let out a laugh, not different from the one I was used to hearing 12 years ago. It was good to see her laugh like that.

In the evening, we had a number of visitors from the office. A few trainees came, Ciggy came, Ghosh paid a visit. Sourabh didn't bother. Since it wasn't Design department's fault it wasn't his business.

"What happened exactly? Did you find out?" I asked Ghosh.

"Yeah... You see, when we were testing, Joga Singh entered through the door that connects Bay 4 and Bay 3. Since there was no 'Test in Progress' strip around the Transformer, he thought there was no test taking place. The huge transformer blocked his view and he couldn't see us standing on the other side. He touched the transformer got a shock."

"And then he fell on the ground and hurt his head?"

"Yeah. I hope he makes it through this."

“He will.”

“If he doesn’t, I won’t be able to forgive myself.”

“He will.”

“I am sorry for the way I acted in the morning. I guess I was mad at Sourabh and took that out on you.”

“I understand.”

In the night, I and Pritha were left alone on that floor. A lone nurse was doing the rounds. They had turned off a few lights in the hallway. It was kind of dark and romantic in there.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“No.”

But she was hungry. It’s common sense really. Normal human beings get hungry every five hours. Another common sense is girls have false egos.

“Well, I am hungry. I will get myself something to eat.” I said and dashed off to the hospital canteen.

I got myself masala dosa and buttermilk. I got another plate of hot, steaming idlis and sweet mango lassi.

“Here. Your favourite,” I said presenting her the plate of idlis.

“How do you know it’s my favourite?” She asked quizzically.

“Well, that’s what your mom used to pack for lunch every alternate day!”

She smiled.

“You remember a whole lot of things about me.”

“I sure do. I am good at it. I practice.”

“Practice what?”

“Remembering things about you, remembering you.”

I don’t know how I got the guts to say all that. But it was the truth and it had to come out one day.

She looked at me with her big hazel eyes. Even in that dim light, her eyes shone with

love. I wanted to kiss her. Softly, all night long. Her eyes filled with tears. A tear rolled down her cheeks.

“Thanks for being so calm today. You saved his life. He wouldn’t have been able to make it till Centurion.”

“Don’t cry.” I tried to console her.

There is something about a girl crying. I think men were hardwired to feel uncomfortable around a girl who is crying. It’s tough enough being around a crying mother or sister, but it becomes even more difficult when that girl is the love of your life.

I wiped her tears with my thumb. It was cold outside but her skin was warm. A gentle breeze was blowing and her hair fell on her cheeks. Her cheeks were so soft. Her lips were so full. I brought myself closer to her. I wanted to kiss her. She didn’t flinch. She stayed there, wanting to be kissed. She closed her eyes. I leaned, but stopped. Sourabh’s face flashed in my head. Am I doing

something wrong? Am I taking advantage of her? But I loved her!

Pritha opened her eyes. There was uncomfortable silence.

“I... I will check on Mr. Singh,” she excused herself.

I went to return the plates to the canteen. When I came back, Pritha was sitting in the chair, reading some magazine.

“Umm... How is Joga now?”

She didn't look up at me.

“He is better now.” She kept reading the magazine.

“Hey, look, I am sorry.”

She looked up at me.

“Me too.”

“I got carried away.”

“Hmm... Let this go.”

“Yeah...”

“Hmm...”

Pregnant pause. Uncomfortable silence.

“So, Sourabh called?” I asked as I sat in a chair beside her.

“No. On Wednesday nights, he plays snooker with his friends.”

“So...err... he didn’t call?” I asked surprised.

“No.”

I didn’t want a one word answer on that one.

“And even you didn’t call him?”

“No.”

Another one word answer.

“Are you serious about him?” It was a serious question. I had no clue of the answer, and I think, neither did she.

“As in?”

“As in... You gonna get married to him?”

“Lets see.”

Now we had two word answers.

“Are you in love with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then?”

“Then what?”

“I mean then what’s the plan?”

I was getting irritated.

“There is no plan.”

“Of course there is a plan, everyone has a plan.”

“You want to know the plan? You do? Go ask my father... He makes all plans for me. He decides what I have to do in life. You have questions, go take them to him.” She exploded.

She barged out of the pathway into the balcony. I sat there for a moment, stunned. Then, as an afterthought, I decided to go up to her.

She was crying. I placed my arm around her shoulder. She hid her face into my shirt.

“I am sorry Dev. I really am.”

“It’s okay Pritha.”

I held her close. She kept on crying. Then she looked at me. Her eyes were red from all the crying. Her nose had turned red and was

cuter than ever before. I felt an incredible urge to kiss her nose.

"I am sorry too, Pritha." I said.

"Sorry for what? Asking me questions a friend would want to ask? You shouldn't be sorry. I should be. You ask me questions and I will answer them."

"My questions are going to be difficult." I said.

"I always topped remember?" She smiled.

I looked at the starry sky, there must be at least a million stars up there, I thought. I started asking her the toughest question she might have faced all her life.

"How did you meet Sourabh?" I asked. This was going to be the easiest of all questions I was going to ask her that night.

"At a party, my father introduced him to me."

"How does your father know him?"

"My father knows his father."

"Inderjit Mehrotra? How?"

“How do you know his name?” she asked surprised. Because he ruined my father’s career, I wanted to say. But I kept it inside.

“Never mind. You tell me how does your father know him?”

“They are business associates,” she said, which was strange.

“What business? Your father works for the government!”

“He has a stake in uncle’s business.”

“Do you love Sourabh?” The toughest question of all. I knew the answer by now. In fact, I was involuntarily smiling as I asked this.

“He is a nice guy.”

“That’s not the answer to my question.” I said.

“I don’t know what love is. So I can’t answer that.”

“Do you even like him?” I asked.

“He is smart. He is handsome. He is intelligent. Any girl will like him.”

“I don’t want to know about any girl. I want to know if this girl likes him or not.”

“I think I like him. Even my father thinks he’s a nice guy. Moreover, this alliance will help both the families.”

She sounded like she was buying grocery. This was her life here and all she could think of is how the alliance will “help” both families.

“So you will marry the guy if your dad says so?”

“Yes. Our parents do so much for us. Why is it wrong if they want something in return? And it’s for our own good.”

Those sentences were left wanting for conviction. It seemed, she wanted to convince herself than convince me. She continued –

“You know what I wanted to be in life?”

“Yes, of course, you wanted to be a doctor.”

“No, my father wanted me to be that. I always wanted to be an artist.”

I was reminded of all the art classes she took back in school. I used to hate art. I still don't know the difference between peach and brown colour. If you ask me, peach should be a fruit, not a colour. But I used to attend those classes because it gave me a chance to look at Pritha.

“My father wanted to be a doctor, but my grandfather was poor, so he couldn't realise his dreams,” she continued, “Those dreams he wanted to live through me. I studied what he wanted to do- Nothing wrong in that.”

“Hmm... you asking me or telling me?” I asked.

“I don't know. He has worked hard for us. I can't see him sad. And what's wrong with arranged marriage? My parents had an arranged marriage and they are happy. Your parents had an arranged marriage too.

Arranged marriages work. So if he wants me to marry some guy, I will.”

“But... but...what if you fall in love?” I asked.

“I won’t.” There was lack of confidence in the way she said it.

“What if you do?”

“Then love will have to kneel in front of my family’s wishes.” She said coldly.

She left. I kept standing in the balcony for some time. Soaking in the moonlight. Soaking in the beauty.

In the morning, I woke up to find Pritha sleeping in the On-duty Doctor’s chambers. I bought a bouquet of lovely orchid flowers and put in a note – “Love will Triumph.”

mmm

Chapter 17

All on Board

“Where in the world have you been?” Akshay asked as soon as I reached home from hospital. “I was worried.”

“You sound like my mom!” I said.

“Oh shut up! What happened? You didn’t even call!”

I told him everything that happened. Well, not everything. A few details of me and Pritha, I hid from him. They were too personal to discuss with anyone.

After Kunal, Umesh and Akshay left for work, I called Ciggy and told him that I won’t be coming to office today. I spent the whole day deciding what I had to do to next. I lay on the bed looking blankly at fan, which made a constant click-clack sound for some reason.

Winter evening. On a hill. Castaway. All alone. I see golden grass. I walk through the dense foliage. The evening sun casts its golden light- like a huge sodium bulb in the sky. I see a small cottage. A lady in a yellow saree. Her hair is wrapped in a towel. She is standing with her back towards me, plucking marigold flowers. Her yellow saree looked

dazzling in the yellow of the sun. The winter breeze flows. She turns around. Pritha.

“What took you so long Dev?” The sound of a thousand small bells ringing. I tried to come up with an answer. I opened my mouth, but the words won’t come out. She placed her finger on my lips.

“Come in... I have to show you something...”

She starts walking inside. I follow her. A girl in a white frock with pink polka dots is sitting in a corner playing with dolls. She looks up at me and her eyes light up. She comes running into my arms, I lift her up. She lands a peck on my cheek. I look at Pritha. She is standing in a corner, looking at us, smiling.

“Dev? Dev!”

“Huh?” I opened my eyes to see Umesh’s and Kunal’s ugly faces hovering above me.

“Wake up man! It’s 8:30,” Kunal said.

“You were dreaming, weren’t you?” Umesh asked.

“Ugh? Yeah... I guess so,” I managed to utter.

“You were smiling all the time,” Umesh had a big smile on his face.

“I bet you were dreaming of Silk Smitha... She’s such a babe,” Kunal said, his eyes rolled up in pleasure.

“She’s a babe and a half... She’s fat you idiot,” Umesh clearly didn’t share Kunal’s enthusiasm when it came to Silk Smitha.

“She is not fat. She is, well, plump.” Kunal defended his dream girl... or dream woman... or whatever that she was...

“That’s a euphemism for fat!” Umesh said coldly.

“Well at least she is not like the skinny girls you are after. Priyanka Chopra and everyone.” Kunal was kinda pissed off.

“Hey! Don’t say a word about Priyanka. Dev, ask him not to say anything about Piggy Chops.”

“Huh?” I was still trying to make the transition from my dream world, from the pretty world, the world of Pritha and polka dots to the world where Silk Smitha was considered desirable.

“Get out of dreamland yaar... I am hungry. Let’s go eat.” Kunal demanded.

We reached Shetty’s Udipi in fifteen minutes.

We ordered our favourite masala dosa. Kunal and Umesh pounced on the dosa. I had slept the whole day. I wasn’t too hungry. Last night, I didn’t get enough sleep. I had slept on a chair in the hallway.

Kunal and Umesh were giving each other suggestive glance over mouthfuls of dosa. Umesh, cleared his throat and said-

“Dev, I wanted ask you something... as in.. I know it's your life and it's your choice but... but-”

Kunal helped Umesh finish the sentence.

“But we didn't see this coming, so we are, like, a little shocked.”

I had no idea what they were talking about and I didn't intend to know. I was happy enough thinking about Pritha and the cute girl in the white and pink polka dotted frock. I was happy thinking of yellow grass and a small cottage.

“Dude, don't get us wrong. We are not confronting you or anything,” Umesh said when he realised I don't give a damn about what they want to know.

“I mean, we are cool with it,” Kunal chipped in.

“Yeah. It's just that we would like to know. You know Akshay also doesn't look like that. Neither do you, but when we saw

what we saw, we were like a little bewildered.”

I was jolted out of my dream world after the mention of Akshay.

“What? What did I do? And what did Akshay do?”

Kunal took a deep breath and sank into his chair. Umesh took the charge.

“Dude... I know.”

“About what?” I asked.

“About you and Akshay.”

“What about us?”

“I saw you enter his room around four thirty in the morning.”

“But you were asleep.” I said.

“I wasn’t. I got up to take a dump.”

“But you do that at 6 in the morning.”

“It is a dump not ‘Indian Idol’ that a schedule should be followed!!” Umesh was furious that I used to keep a tab on his crap timings. “Anyway, it’s your life and you can do anything with it. Just remember Akshay

changes his girlfriends every month, you really think he will stick with a guy for long.”

What in the world was he saying...?

“What do you mean... I don’t get you.”

“See Dev, forget Akshay. You will get a girl. Don’t be so desperate.”

It dawned on me.

“What the! You think me and Akshay? What the? You ass! What the?”

Kunal jumped out of his chair...

“Oh... So... so... you guys aren’t like... let’s say... a couple?”

“No! We are not gay.”

“But why else will you enter his room in the morning?” Umesh asked.

That was it. Umesh and Kunal had imagined me and Akshay having hot sweaty sex. It would need a lot of convincing to erase that image out of their heads. I had to tell them all about Pritha. About my love for her. For a girl. And about how Akshay was helping me to get her.

“Oh! So you are... straight,” said Umesh.

“Of course I am! Why do you sound disappointed?”

“Well, I had a bet going with Kunal. I bet 100 rupees that you were gay.”

“What? You guys had a bet going on my sexual orientation? And that too just 100 rupees!”

“Look, we are really sorry,” Kunal said stuffing a mouthful of masala dosa in his mouth.

“You see, you have no girlfriend and your life isn’t exciting enough. We thought maybe this was your way of... you know... having some fun.”

“You crazy? As far as girlfriends are considered I don’t think you two have ever been near a woman who wasn’t your mother. And I don’t see how you guys are better than me when it comes to an exciting life. Your life sucks too.”

Now, these guys were my friends. I wasn't mad at them or anything; in fact I found it amusing that they thought people change their sexual orientation just because they can't impress the opposite sex. But I felt bad about the 'Your life sucks too' thingy. I shouldn't have said that. Kunal was visibly hurt. Umesh sank his face into his plate.

Back at the flat, we weren't talking to one another. Not because we were mad at each other or anything, it's just that when guys feel hurt, they don't talk. I lay down on the bed. Kunal was sitting on a chair reading the day's newspaper at 11 in the night. It was symbolic. He never really read the papers. Umesh sat in a corner massaging his hair with coconut oil. That was symbolic too. Umesh didn't have enough hair.

"You know what guys, I am sorry," I said.

"We are sorry too," Umesh said, pouring more oil on his head.

Kunal kept the newspaper aside.

“Yeah... We wanna make it up to you Dev. We want to help you get your girl back.”

“Yeah Dev. We want to help too,” Umesh stopped oiling.

“Thanks guys, but you think you can help?” I asked, still being insensitive and all.

“Of course we can. Maybe not with the main stuff, but must be some stuff where we can come handy,” Kunal said.

“Yeah... We want to help,” Umesh said, now styling his hair.

I wanted to accept their help then and there. But Akshay had asked me to keep the whole thing a secret.

“Umm... Well, why don't we do this- Why don't we freak Akshay out, the way you freaked me out, with your gay talk and all.”

“Oh... sure... sure... We would love to,” Umesh sounded excited.

“Yeah... tonight, as soon as he comes back from his date, we will bombard him with questions about his orientation,” said Kunal.

“This is gonna be fun,” Umesh rubbed his hands in glee.

“Good. So that means, I should go to sleep. You can catch him when he is alone.” I said.

And that was that. I went to sleep. Back to the world of Pritha and polka dotted frocks, the world of golden grass and the evening sun. I slept. I dreamt.

In the morning, I woke up to three ugly faces hovering above me. Kunal and Umesh had freaked Akshay out enough for him to accept that he was helping me. After a lot of persuasion, he accepted Kunal and Umesh’s help. Now there were four of us onboard.

mmm

Chapter 18

Planning the Date!!!

This part of my life is called – planning the date. I had asked Pritha out for a date on Sunday evening. By Akshay’s standards, I had ruined my first couple dates with Pritha,

this date was my last chance to get her attracted to me. It was like a round table conference that day. Only there was no round table, or chairs for that matter. As usual, Akshay headed the meeting.

“So what are you gonna do for the date?” Akshay asked.

“I will take her to Pizza Hut,” I said.

“Have I taught you nothing?” Akshay said with a hint of resignation.

“Why? What’s wrong with PH?”

“Think of it like this – What is it that you can do, but Sourabh can’t? Can’t Sourabh take her out to PH in his slick Mercedes?”

“I think he can.” I took a calculated guess.

“Of course he can. Even our friend Umesh can take her to PH!”

“Err... well, actually I prefer Shettys,” Umesh pitched in. His loyalty to Shetty’s could not be challenged.

“Any how what I am saying is, give her something that she will never forget.

Something that cannot be bought with money! You love her right?"

"With all my heart!" I can be quite melodramatic if I want to.

"Then show her that you do!"

"Hmm... What do I do?"

"I knew you were gonna ask me this question." Sometimes Akshay's cockiness can poke your neural nerve.

"And I suppose you have an answer..."

"L9" Akshay said.

"What?"

"Level 9. It's a terrace restaurant on the 9th floor of The World Convention Centre."

"The one on Senapati Bapat Marg?"

"Yeah that's the one! With the hills surrounding you on three sides, under the night sky, with cool winter breeze touching your face and..."

"All right! We get the picture!" Umesh said.

“Hehe... And what’s with the cool winter breeze touching your face! What are you – a girl?” Kunal added.

That’s the level of jokes Kunal cracked. Of course, all of us including Akshay laughed at that. We engineers are good at laughing at poor jokes. We almost never hurt the ego of the joke cracker.

“But Aks, can’t Sourabh do that for her too? I mean what’s special about dinner at L9?” Umesh asked.

“Hmm... the special part you leave to me. I have thought that out.”

“All right. I trust you.” I said.

“Like you have a choice! Heh heh.” Akshay’s like such a prick.

It felt good to think about the date with Pritha. Meeting her in the office was always difficult. I would have to fake a headache or something to meet her in her department. But I never did it. I am sure she would know

that I was faking it. Also, I didn't want to look desperate.

"Now that we have a venue for the date, let's teach our friend here how to behave on one," Akshay said.

“Behave?” I asked.

Akshay formed a huddle with Umesh and Kunal. Akshay kept whispering something, I couldn’t hear him properly. I guess even Umesh couldn’t hear him properly. He kept on asking “What?” “Means?” Akshay pulled him and Kunal to his room. He shut the door. After 15 minutes he came out with them.

I believe I am very well behaved in general, date or no date. What’s the point in preparing me? I didn’t get the point of all this.

Kunal pulled the table we used to dine on, on the rare occasion that one of us was in the mood to cook, from the kitchen to the living room. Akshay brought two chairs from his room and placed it beside the table, facing each other. I sat on the bed dumbfounded.

“Ok. This is what we are gonna do. I am gonna give you a crash course in Dating Technology. This course is also called

D.Tech. We have less time, thanks to our friend's," Akshay said pointing towards me, "overtly Macho ego. Had he waited a little before setting up his date, D.Tech would have been more effective."

Meanwhile Kunal went to the kitchen and brought two white candles, he lit them and placed them on the table. Akshay went in and brought two plates and a pair of knife-fork we never used. I was getting a whiff of things now.

All this while, Umesh was sitting on the bed, with his legs crossed, like a girl's, and had a superior female demeanour thing going on. I wasn't helping 'cause I had no idea what was going on. But Umesh knew what they had decided behind closed doors of Akshay's room. Still he wasn't helping. He was sitting there, like he was the Queen of England or something...

Finally, once Kunal and Akshay were done, Akshay spoke,

“Ok. Here is what we are trying to do. We are trying to create a romantic setting. A date-like setting.”

“Okay. What do I have to do?” I asked.

“Dev, you are the guy.” Akshay said. Of course, I was the guy. “Umesh, you are the girl.”

“What?” I asked. “Why are you calling Umesh a girl?”

“Why? What is wrong with me? I can be a girl,” Umesh was clearly hurt by my statement.

“But... but... I have to be romantic with him!?” I asked.

“Who else do you want? You want Akshay? He can’t be the girl with biceps like that. Out of the three only I have a slender frame,” Umesh had taken this rather seriously.

“But... but... Ok. You will have to hide your ugly face. Here, take this,” I threw a bed sheet at Umesh. He tied it around him like

an evening gown. Something told me he had done it before.

“Okay then. Umesh is the girl, Dev is the guy and Kunal is your waiter.” Saying that, Akshay sat on chair in the corner, from where he could see me and Umesh.

“Let’s start now. We don’t have much time.”

Kunal escorted us to the table in the middle of the living room.

“Here’s your table Sir!” Kunal slipped into the role of a waiter so easily.

I sat on my chair. Umesh kept standing, waiting for something.

Beeeeeeepppppp... Akshay had bought a buzzer a couple of days ago. Back then I didn’t know what it was for. Now I did.

“What? What did I do wrong?”

“You are sitting, your girl is standing!! You should pull out the chair for her,” Akshay said. “Girls like all this. You know she is special, now make her feel special.”

“Oh! Okay. I will remember that.”

We started again. Kunal led us to the table –

“Here’s your table Sir!”

I pulled out the chair for Umesh. He smiled flirtatiously at me and in a voice that bordered on femininity said – “Thank you.”

Scared me to shit I tell you.

“I hope you are comfortable Sir.” Kunal could apply for a job in any five star hotel.

“Yes, we are. Thank you,” I managed to say.

Kunal handed us two Femina magazines. They were supposed to be menus. Now, don’t ask me what Femina was doing in a flat devoid of females.

“I will have Masala Dosa and Mango Lassi,” I said.

Beeeeeeeppppp...

“Now what?” I asked. I don’t like to be disturbed while eating.

“You are at L9, order something fancy! When you are at Shetty’s then it makes sense to order dosa. Get it?”

“But I don’t know any fancy dishes.”

“Oh... try the Risotto olla Milanese.” Akshay rolled his tongue to get the pronunciation right.

“What is a Risotto?” I asked. I like to know the origin of words. I am a nerd, go sue me.

“How does it matter?” Akshay shot back.

“Okay. I will have the Risotto olla Milanese.” I surrendered.

“Good choice sir! And how about you ma’am?” Kunal said looking at Umesh.

Umesh was fiddling with the bed sheet, in a womanly manner. Okay, in a manner that seemed womanly!

“I will have the Tuscan bean and Pasta soup with a sprinkling of blue cheese.”

“Sure ma’am,” saying that Kunal left us.

How and when Umesh heard of those dishes beats me. I kept sitting there, wondering what to do next.

“It’s a lovely night, isn’t it Dev?” Umesh asked battling his eyelids. For a moment, he actually looked pretty.

“Umm... umm... Yes it is!”

All this while, Akshay was sitting in a corner with a notepad in one hand and a buzzer in another. I glanced to look at him, he glared at me.

“It’s so peaceful here,” Umesh said playing with his hair, the ones that were left.

“Yeah... yeah... It is...very peaceful.”

Be more romantic you ass...Akshay whispered from the corner.

Now with due respect to everyone involved, it’s bloody difficult to be romantic looking at Umesh. I mean he is not ugly... well he is... but... had he been like a pretty, I would have still found it difficult, you see, he is, like, a guy!

“Yeah... peaceful..,” I continued. “I have heard the food here is yummy too.”

“Is it?” Umesh asked in a flirty voice.

“Yeah... yeah...”

Be romantic you bozo! Akshay shouted this time.

“Yeah yeah... it is yummy,” I continued.

“But... but... not as yummy as you!”

Beeepppppppppp!

“You crazy? When I said romantic, I didn’t mean vulgar!” Akshay was furious.

“But...that... that isn’t vulgar,” I protested.

“It is too much in-your-face. What happened to being khool?”

“Oh... but really, it’s difficult with Umesh playing Pritha’s part.”

“Well, he’s the best we got!”

And with that we returned back to the drill. Kunal brought bread crumbs in white plates from the kitchen and we were supposed to eat that using fork and knife. There

were a lot of other fine points that Akshay enlightened me on.

The training on D.Tech went on for the entire weekend. Wherever we went to eat, I had to pull chairs for each one of them. I had to be polite and well behaved. But worse of all, I had to be romantic and flirty around those guys. I was expected to come up with clever lines every now and then. I mean, it's difficult! How do you stay all flirty around guys? Had I spent more time doing this, I would have started pasting Shahrukh Khan and George Clooney's posters all over my bedroom walls. Thankfully, the day of the date came soon. And I was spared the ordeal. Come to think of it, George Clooney isn't all that bad. Ahem. This is the D. Tech acting...

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Chapter 19

The Date!

With some intensive training over the last couple of days, I was ready to go...well,

almost. As in, my heart still fluttered at the thought of having dinner with Pritha. I was nervous, but just the right amount. The amount that is required for you to succeed.

Akshay had left with Umesh and Kunal in tow in the afternoon. He said that he had some “setting” to do before the date. The date was around 8, I didn’t get what setting required an entire afternoon.

I called Pritha.

“Hey!”

“Hi Dev!”

“I hope you remember our date tonight.”

“Of course I do. I had to cancel my other plan, remember?”

“Yes I do. We are gonna have dinner at L9. Know the place?”

“L9? That is level 9, right? I will be there.”

“See you around 8 then.”

“Okay.”

I started getting ready at six thirty, I didn't want to be late or get stuck in the traffic. Pune traffic on Sunday nights is a devil. I wore my favourite Arrow shirt and jeans. I know, kinda weird, not something that you would wear to a restaurant, but tell you what; Indian girls find an office shirt worn over a pair of denims very hot! Okay, I didn't know that, Akshay told me.

I reached World Convention Centre around seven thirty. Entered my name at the reception and then took the elevator to the ninth floor. I approached the counter just outside L9.

“Excuse me, sir!”

A guy dressed in a dark blue blazer, probably the captain at the restaurant stopped me. These swanky hotels have guys like these to make you feel unimportant.

“Yes?”

“You are not wearing a tuxedo!” He had a British accent. Fake of course.

I realised something. This guy, it was... it was... Umesh! In a Tuxedo! A Tux completely changes the personality of the person I tell you.

“Umesh? What’s wrong with you?! What is going on?”

“Isn’t it cool? I am the captain here and I want you to wear a Tux,” he said excitedly. He pulled out a black swanky Tux from behind the counter. “Here! Put this on!”

“I am not wearing any Tux!” I said. There was no way I was gonna change from the ‘hot’ look to the ‘old fart’ look.

“Hey look! I don’t make the rules!” He said.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder. I turned to find her looking at me with her lovely hazel eyes. She was wearing a maroon salwaar kameez. It had some embroidery but essentially it was very simple. Just like her - simple and pretty. She had a couple of purple orchids in her hand.

“Dev? Why is everyone giving me orchids?” She asked in her honey dipped voice.

“Umm... umm...” Think Dev, think!
“Umm... ‘cause you are pretty.”

Maybe that was the setting Akshay was talking about. He must have requested all the guys to give her orchids. I must have told him only once that Pritha liked orchids, and he remembered that!

“Nooo,” she said. “I come into the WCC and the gatekeeper gives me an orchid saying ‘Ma’am you are beautiful’. I go to the reception to enter my name, the man at the counter stops me and gives me an orchid saying ‘Ma’am you are beautiful’, I enter the lift and say Level 9, the liftman takes out an orchid and says-”

“Ma’am you are beautiful?” I offered to finish her sentence. “See? I was right! They really like you. And who wouldn’t, you are beautiful.”

She blushed at that.

“Uh... should we go in?” She asked.

“Ma’am, there is a dress code.” Umesh pitched in. “Tuxedos for men, evening gowns for women.”

“Oh... but, I don’t have an evening gown!” she said.

What was he doing! He was ruining the whole thing. Just then he pulled out a turquoise evening gown from behind the counter and handed it to Pritha. Now turquoise is the name that girls have given to the colour blue. I mean, why can’t they call it blue! Wasn’t turquoise an animal that goes into its shell every time it senses danger? Oh wait... That is tortoise.

“Ma’am, you can wear this!” Umesh said handing her the gown. “And this too,” he handed her high heeled sandals or whatever they call them.

“Oh... but do I absolutely have to?”

“Yeah, does she have to?” I quipped in. I was worried she might call the whole thing off.

“Sir, I don’t make the rules.”

“Are these my size?” She asked checking the gown and the high heels.

“They sure are!” said Umesh.

This is the guy who gets up at six to take a dump, this is the guy who wears a baniyan for most part of the day and here he was ordering us to ‘dress up’. Anyway, we decided to dress up, in our respective costumes of course, and in our respective restrooms of course.

I wore my tuxedo and came out of the men’s restroom. I waited outside women’s restroom for Pritha. She took a good twenty minutes to get dressed. Girls always take a lot of time to get dressed. But I swear to God, it’s all worth it! She came out, wearing her turquoise evening gown.

She looked beautiful! Her hazel eyes, her lovely curls, her curvy body. The dress hugged her body, revealing her figure. Till now, I had seen her in loose salwaar kameez which covered most of her. This gown was held by delicate straps at her shoulders. This was the first time I saw her shoulders. They were so shapely, and so delicate. My eyes lingered down. I wanted to soak in as much as I could. I would be lying if I said I wasn't aroused..., sexually. I would be lying if I said that 'thoughts' didn't cross my mind. Pritha saw me looking at her. Girls can distinguish between a glance and a leer. I was leering for sure.

“How do I look?”

My throat went dry. In a hoarse voice I said- “lovely!”

She blushed. To be honest, I don't get why girls like Pritha blush after hearing something nice about them, I am sure they must hear such things about them all the

time. But then, maybe, not the compliment but the person who gives the compliment matters.

I gave her my arm to hold, like they show in old Hollywood movies. She let out a laugh and held it as we entered the Level 9. Umesh held the door open for us. There is a small indoor section at L9 too. But today it was empty!!!

Who would wanna eat inside when you got such pleasant weather, and for some lucky blokes like me, such pleasant company? We kept walking through the indoor section and finally reached the terrace. The terrace was empty! There was a single table at the far corner of the terrace. Pritha looked at me confused. I wasn't less confused. Why was L9 so empty on a Sunday night!

"Sir! This way sir." It was Kunal! He wore a white blazer, like those waiters in costly places.

We walked to the lone table on the terrace. I pulled the chair for Pritha. It was dark on the terrace save for one pink candle that was on the table.

“It’s a lovely night, isn’t it Dev?”

I looked up at the sky. There was no moon. There were like a billion stars. It almost felt like they were here to watch us.

“It’s lovely,” I said. Then looked into her eyes and said, “But not as lovely as you.”

She smiled. It was peaceful. Just me and her. Isn’t that how God meant it to be?

“How come we are the only ones in the restaurant?” She asked.

Only if I knew! Akshay had come up with this. But the thing is; why hadn’t he told me about it? And where was he! Pritha was looking at me, waiting for an answer.

“Umm... maybe they decided to let in only those couples who were made for each other.”

Pritha looked at me, kinda amused at what I had said.

“Devvv?” She said half amused, half annoyed.

“Pritha.”

Her name is so sweet. Calling her name out like that seemed to say that I mean that thing about made for each other.

Now, I knew she was someone’s girlfriend, and here I was telling her that she was meant to be with me. Pritha was bound to be a little taken aback, albeit in a good way, to see this side of Dev. The Dev she knew would always be a little hesitant to say something of that magnitude! But I figured that I had nothing to lose, since I was not asking for her answer. In fact, I wasn’t even waiting for her answer. I almost declared that she was made for me.

Kunal came in with the menu.

I placed the order for Risotto alla Milanese and Russian salad. She asked for the Roasted Vegetable Mediterranean Lasagne.

“You look handsome in this Tuxedo,” she said, looking at me. I tell you, it is such a thrill when a girl you love says that. I felt a shot of blood rush to my ears. When Akshay had coached me, he made one thing clear, you have to be ready to keep her guessing, keep it interesting...

“Well, thanks. I always look good in rented suits,” I said. The line wasn’t that clever but I couldn’t come up with anything wittier than that then. Trust me; it’s difficult to think straight when you got blood rushing in far extremities of your body.

Kunal brought in two plates. This time, instead of bread crumbs there was actual food in the plates.

We ate in each other’s company. Soft music, I think it was Ronan Keating’s ‘When you say nothing at all’, that was playing in the

background. The only other sound was of the knife and fork touching the plate. I would say something silly every now and then and she would laugh her sweet laugh. Her laugh - like a seven year old's - unrestricted, full of innocence and clearly brimming over.

For dessert, I ordered a Gelato, while she ordered Vanilla ice cream with Kahlua. What is Kahlua? Don't even ask me! To be honest, I think even she didn't know about it.

"What is a Kahlua anyway?" I asked.

"I have no idea!" She said it with mock confidence. For a moment there I thought she was kidding me.

Kunal brought in the dessert. She savoured every bite of the ice-cream. The metal spoon touched her pink lips, the cold ice-cream melted as soon as it touched her warm lips. I never knew you could eat ice-cream like that. My throat ran dry. She noticed me staring at her.

"What are you staring at Mr. Dev?"

Using ‘Mr.’ as a salutation, when least required, is a girl’s way of flirting.

“I...I...wasn’t staring...”

Forget all coaching. If the girl decides to get flirty, you are on your own mister.

“Oh, yes you were!”

She smiled; baffled, but quite enjoying the fact that she was being stared at.

She looked at the sky.

“There are so many stars in the sky!”

“Yeah...” I managed to say. “There are so many more in your eyes.”

A smile played on her lips...

“But there is no moon today,” she said.

“There is one,” I said looking at her.

Soft music was still playing in the background. Now it was playing- ‘I love you’ by Robbie Williams.

“May I have a dance with you, Mr. Dev?” She asked.

If I didn’t know better I would say she was high. The ease with which she was with

me was quite uncharacteristic of her. She had always been this shy girl. Most of the times, she had trouble meeting my eyes, and here she is now asking me for a dance. Nothing wrong with that really, only that I have two left feet and hadn't received any coaching on dancing with Umesh. I gave the empty terrace a quick glance.

“Oh... a dance? Really? Okay.”

I was not gonna miss this chance of holding her close to me.

I held her hand and led her to the centre of the terrace. She was wearing high heels and was finding it difficult to keep balance. I have always had a liking for simplicity. Pritha always kept it simple. No flashy clothes, no major makeup, no fancy high heels, she was comfortable in her own skin. In a way, she was so unlike me, I always wanted to be someone else.

I held her close to me. Since she was wearing high heels, she now almost came up

to my height. She rested her left hand on my shoulder and I held her right hand in my left. Her hands seemed so small in mine. But it fit so perfectly. I placed my right hand on her waist. The song played in the background.

Then afterwards we drop into a quiet little place

And have a drink or two

And then I go and spoil it all

By saying something stupid

Like "I love you"

I pulled her close to me. I think God hardwired us to slow dance, which is why even men like me who can't co-ordinate the movement of their feet to a simple left-right-left, have no problems dancing with a girl in their arms.

And then I go and spoil it all

By saying something stupid

Like "I love you"

She placed her head on my shoulders. We kept moving to the soft tunes of different songs.

‘Take my breath away’
Watching every motion
In my foolish lover’s game
On this endless ocean
Finally lovers know no shame
Turning and returning
To some secret place inside
Watching in slow motion
As you turn around and say
Take my breath away
Take my breath away
“You take my breath away, Dev!”

Okay! I didn’t see that coming. She had to be high! What did she have for dinner? What is going on?! But whatever it was, it was lovely!

“Huh?”

“Dev? You know, I had a huge crush on you back in school.”

“You did?”

“Yeah... You used to take my breath away,” she looked into my eyes, “You still do!”

She can't be high. I told myself. I had the same things she did. And I don't think there was alcohol in any of them.

“Uh... umm... I think we should go home now, it's getting late,” I said.

It was eleven in the night now. It's difficult to find rickshaws this late in Pune.

I took her to the counter where Umesh was still standing. He was a bit sleepy. It was way past his bedtime.

“Sir, we have a taxi waiting for you. Madam's bags containing her clothes have already been loaded,” he said.

“Thank you.”

I held her by her waist as we walked out. I held her 'cause her walk was a little wobbly with those high heels and I feared she might trip over.

We reached downstairs. There was a pre-paid Honda city waiting for us. Pritha was sleepy now, and definitely high. I know because Umesh behaved in the same way when he has too many beers. Pritha was leaning against me. I helped her get in the taxi.

“Where to, sir?” The driver asked.

Before I could answer, Pritha quipped in – “To a place far... far away.”

Yep! Drunk for sure!

“Take us to Aundh – Trident apartments.”

“Nooo... I want to go to far ... far away.”

“We will go there next time.”

“Promise?” she asked looking into my eyes.

“Promise.”

How can you say no to that?

All of a sudden she was eight years old! Even her tone became child-like. She sounded so cute. When Umesh gets drunk he sings old Kumar Sanu songs. Atleast Pritha

wasn't singing any Alka Yagnik songs! In that sense she was easier to handle.

It was a long ride to her apartment. She slept on my shoulder with her legs curled up on the seat. She was drooling. Some of it wet my Tuxedo. I took out a handkerchief and wiped the drool off her lips. For a second there, I wanted to touch her soft lips. I wanted to kiss her. But decided against that. I thought to myself- There is a fair chance that I might never get her. After all this, she might still decide to be with Sourabh, this might be my last chance to be so close to her. But even if it is, I don't want our first kiss to be like this. I want it to be special.

"High heels hurt," she said in her sleep.

I removed her high heel sandals and pressed her feet for some time.

We reached Trident apartments. She was still sleeping. Sound sleep- like that of a baby. I kept looking at her, curled up like that on the back seat of the car. She looked

so cute. I could keep looking at her. And would have, if it wasn't for the driver –

“Sir? We have reached Trident apartments.”

I woke her up. She woke up startled- like she didn't know where she was or what she was doing. She got out of the car, barefoot.

“Oh! I fell asleep.”

“You sure did!”

She saw the wet drool patch on my shoulder and then touched her face.

“Oh.. I am so sorry. I am sorry.”

She searched for her handkerchief, but obviously, gowns don't have pockets. I took my handkerchief held the back of her head, she tried resisting for a nanosecond, but then gave in. I cleaned a small strip of wet area on her cheek.

She looked down. She looked at the very few cars that whizzed by. She averted her gaze to the closed shops. She looked at everything except me. Then finally when she

ran out of things to stare at, she started looking at her palms. It was eighth grade all over again!

I was glad she was back to her normal shy self. The effect of alcohol was wearing off.

There were a few moments of silence.

“Thank you,” she said, still looking at her palms, her eyes still not meeting mine.

“Good night, Pritha.”

“Good night, Dev.”

She turned around to leave. Then as an afterthought, turned around, brought herself close to me, placed her hand on my shoulder, stood on her toes and kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you for a lovely evening.”

I stood there, under the starry sky, soaking in every moment, wondering if I can pause life here... wondering... wondering...

mmm

Chapter 20

The Celebrations!

I reached home past midnight. All three of them were waiting for me.

“So?” Akshay couldn’t suppress his excitement.

I was trying to act all cool.

“So?”

“What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing.” I said coolly.

“Don’t you lie to us ass,” Kunal jumped in.

I was quite enjoying it.

“Yeah... tell us what happened,” Umesh said. He was still awake. He must be really... really excited to mess up his sleep cycle.

“Okay. I will tell you. She... she kissed me.”

Whoo hoo... Whoopie... Way to go dog...

“On the cheeks.” I completed the sentence.

All of a sudden the celebrations stopped. The three of them looked at me in silence.

Then Akshay said –

“So what? She still kissed you... Whooo hoo.”

And the others joined in - Whoo hoo... Whoopie... Way to go dog...

“We did it guys! It’s a success. Our kid here is on his way to get his girl!” Akshay was happy.

Kunal went into the kitchen and came out with a crate of beer bottles.

“To our friend Dev,” Kunal announced.

“And to our successful plan!” Akshay added.

“And to Kumar Sanu!” Umesh exclaimed.

The three of us looked at him, then looked at each other and rolled on the floor laughing.

After each one of us had enough to drink, and after Umesh had sung, three of Sanu’s saddest songs, I brought on my questionnaire.

“Okay guys, I have a few questions.”

“Bring them on,” said a drunken Kunal.

“Okay, the most important question – How did Pritha get drunk?”

“What?” All three of them exclaimed.

“I thought she doesn’t drink,” said Kunal.

“Yeah! She doesn’t!”

“Was there alcohol in any of the stuff that we ordered?” I asked.

“No way!” Kunal said.

“Yes way!” Akshay said. “Vanilla ice cream with Kahlua has alcohol. Strong quantities of alcohol.”

I glared at Kunal.

“Why couldn’t you tell me that about Kahlua?” I asked.

“How could I tell you? I didn’t know myself! You think I eat at these costly Italian restaurants every day?”

“Why couldn’t you ask the chef?”

“What chef? Couldn’t you see? The place was closed down, it was open only for you guys. We had no chefs.”

“What the? Where did the food come from?”

“Akshay brought it.” Umesh said.

I now averted my gaze to Akshay.

“I brought the food from Tulip star.”

“What? I am confused.”

“Okay. Let me explain. When you placed the order with Kunal, I was waiting at the Tulip Star hotel. Kunal called me and forwarded the list of dishes. I placed an order at Tulip, got it packaged and drove back from Tulip to WCC.”

“And then we just opened the packaging and served it to you,” Kunal added.

I was softened when I heard that. I never thought these guys would do so much for me. I asked myself if I had been an equally good friend to them. I didn't get a concrete answer back.

“Okay, Akshay, you were the only one among us who knew what Kahlua is, then

why didn't you tell me it had alcohol?" I asked.

"I thought you ordered it, not Pritha. How am I supposed to know who orders what? We were short on time, I had only enough time to note down the list of dishes Kunal gave me."

That made sense. But guys are taught not to give in this early to any argument especially when they feel they are right, which they almost always feel.

"Why didn't you get all the food delivered to WCC, I mean, it might have saved us loads of time."

"5 star hotels don't home deliver food," Umesh said.

"Man Dev, you don't seem to express any gratitude for what we did yaar!" Kunal said. He was clearly hurt at me questioning his skill of waiting tables.

"Yeah man, Akshay drove to the Tulip and back a couple of times in record time.

Hadn't it been for him and his Honda, all this wouldn't be possible." Umesh said.

"What? It was your Honda? I thought it was a prepaid taxi?"

"Of course it was my Honda! How could you not notice its beauty!"

Akshay was visibly annoyed.

"Well, you see, I was busy noticing some other beauty." I said. I was getting better at clever lines each second.

"Still... I think it's not fair neglecting the beauty of such a pretty machine."

Akshay loved the car. Sometimes we joked that he loved cars more than he loved women.

"Who was the driver? I mean the guy who drove us to Pritha's place," I asked.

"Vineet Jain." Akshay answered.

"Vineet Jain who?" I asked.

"The owner of L9." Akshay answered coolly.

“What??? You got the owner of a food joint to chauffeur me?”

“Yeah. I figured I couldn’t drive you. I had enough driving for a day. Also I didn’t want Pritha to know that I drive people and stuff. Come on, I have some class!”

“Hehe... Going by that analogy I and Umesh have no class.” Kunal said.

“Oh, don’t you guys worry. Pritha won’t even remember your faces. But this face,” Akshay said holding his chin, “this face cannot be forgotten.”

Kunal and Umesh pounced on him hitting him with pillows and pouring beer on his head.

“Guys! Guys! Don’t waste beer like that. I will be honest, I was just too damn tired driving from Tulip to WCC in the Sunday traffic. So I asked Vineet for help.” Akshay said.

“That brings me to my next question. Who the heck is Vineet Jain and why is he helping you?”

“Well... long story... let's say I helped him get his girl a few years ago.”

“Hmm... I see. So is that how you got the L9 for us on a Sunday night?” It became clear to me now

“Bang on,” said Akshay.

“Okay. I get that. But I have more questions.”

“You should apply for a job as a quiz master.” Kunal said, gulping down a big glass of beer.

“Point noted. My next question is, how in the world did you know Pritha's size? The evening gown fit her perfectly, so did the sandals. You bought all that stuff, right?”

“Obviously! You think Umesh and Kunal know anything about female clothing?” Akshay said.

“We do know about Lingerie,” Kunal added mischievously.

I neglected Kunal’s remark.

“What I want to know is- Have you ever met Pritha?”

“No. I haven’t.” Akshay answered.

“Then how in the world do you know her size?”

“Dr. Neha. She told me. They met at the hospital, you remember? Girls, I tell you! They check each other out more than guys check them out. In fact she came with me to central mall. The blue dress was her choice.”

“Nice choice, I must say.”

“That is what she said about your choice.” Akshay said.

“My choice?” I asked puzzled.

“Pritha.”

“Oh! Hehe... I get it.” I did a manly blush. Yeah, that’s going to be a thing one day.

“She thought you guys make a lovely couple,” Akshay said.

“I will second that. You guys looked amazing together.” Kunal said.

We partied till 4 in the morning. Umesh tried and tried to stay awake, but after 7 of Sanu’s loveliest numbers, he dozed off around 2 am. That is the first time he missed his 6 am dump.

mmm

Chapter 21

How to make Enemies and Fool People!

“I had a lovely time last night.”

It was Pritha on the phone. I looked around the office. Sourabh was in his cabin shouting at some trainee.

“Me too.” I said.

“Hmm...”

“Hmm...”

For a moment there we had nothing to talk about. Both of us were lost in trance. I was thinking about last night and I guess so was she.

“Sourabh is meeting me in the evening,” she said.

That was like a slap on the face. I jolted out of dreamland.

“Hmm... Is he pissed that you cancelled yesterday?”

“Damn pissed. I have never cancelled on him before.”

Strike one!

“I get that. But then, isn’t being pissed his second nature. He is shouting at some poor trainee as we speak.”

“Is he?”

“You bet. Anyway I should get back to work.”

I think I ended the call abruptly to get back at her for her ‘Sourabh meeting her’ statement. Men can be such kids at times.

I spent rest of the day thinking about Pritha. I thought about our dance. It felt so good to hold her like that. I thought about our ride home. She looks so beautiful when

she sleeps. I felt like I had the world when she placed her head on my shoulder. She makes me feel so strong, so complete. Her honey dipped voice resounding in my head. I could still feel her soft, warm lips on my cheeks. I remembered all the sweet things she said to me last night. She said I take her breath away. Was that the alcohol talking? Because today, she mentioned that Sourabh was meeting her in the evening. Nothing wrong with that statement, except the timing. We were feeling good about each other when she had to mention it. It was as if she was reminding me that she was taken. Or maybe, she was reminding herself. Maybe she was restricting herself not to fall in love with me. If she was, she was fighting a losing battle.

I kept thinking about Sourabh meeting her. I kept thinking how to sabotage their meeting. What could I do that she cancels on him. Or can I get him to cancel. There was a

meeting scheduled with a few German consultants, but that is still a couple of days away.

When I ran out of options, I gave up and tried concentrating on my work. Right then, an idea struck.

At around 4 in the evening, Sourabh started packing his bags. As soon as he left, I called Akshay and asked him to meet me near Aundh.

I picked him up.

“What is this about?” He asked confused.

“You will see,” I said.

I took the short cut. If tackling traffic is required, nothing beats a motorbike.

Now I used to take the bus to the office every day. I grew up in Mumbai. I was used to public transport. But Akshay wasn't. In fact, he thought travelling by public transport is not cool. Plus, he threw in some attractions stuff that women had for men with

bikes. I still have serious doubts over it, but what the heck, I bought a gleaming black Bajaj Pulsar 150 for myself. Now, I don't know if it is cool to drive a bike or whether women like it or not, but I know that it's fucking exhilarating to drive one! The Mercedes can take a hike.

I stopped over at a 'Ferns n Petals' shop.

"Why are we stopping here?" Akshay asked fixing his hair.

"Part of the plan," I said.

I went inside the air-conditioned shop. I looked around. I found a lovely bouquet of orchids.

"What are the flowers for?" Akshay asked.

"Part of the plan!"

I zoomed past the evening traffic with Akshay on the pillion. When we reached there, I saw a white Mercedes C class drive in through the gates of the Trident apartments.

"Okay. Here's where your part starts."

I gave him the bouquet and a chit containing an address.

“Go to that guy,” I said pointing towards Sourabh who was not getting out of the Merc, “and ask him about this address.”

Akshay, the smart guy that he is, got the gist of the plan. I hid behind a Gulmohar tree. Akshay galloped to Sourabh and stopped him... Akshay and Sourabh stood face to face. Two creations of nature on whom nature had been more than generous. For me, Akshay had always been by far the most handsome guy I had ever known. But in that moment, the designer suit clad Sourabh easily overshadowed Akshay. Sourabh had some presence! Okay, this is beginning to sound gay again. The point here being- For the first time there, I realised that I was up against Sourabh! The guy could make Akshay look like a delivery boy.

Akshay was asking Sourabh about the address. I could hear them clearly.

“Sir, could you please tell me where I can find this place?” Akshay passed on the chit.

Now normally Sourabh wouldn't wait to answer the query of an insignificant delivery boy, but Akshay's personality and the bouquet of purple orchids got him interested. He took the chit in his hand and read the content –

Pritha Bakshi

Trident apartments

A Wing, Flat no. 1402

Aundh.

Pune.

“Do you know where it is? I have to deliver these flowers there.”

“Who sent these flowers?” Sourabh asked suspiciously.

“It's from an unnamed person.”

“Unnamed?”

“Arre sir, these sissy men come to our flower shop and ask us to deliver flowers to

the women they adore.” Akshay was good at convincing people.

“Uh huh... I see... Is there any note accompanying the bouquet?” Saurabh asked.

“No sir, you really think a guy who doesn’t have the guts to name himself will write a note?”

“Hmm...”

“Sir? Do you know the address or not? I am busy.”

Akshay was doing a fine job I must say.

“I will tell you what, I know this address, and I will deliver it to her.”

“Oh! Thank you, sir. That will save me a lot of time.”

“No problem.”

Saurabh grabbed the bouquet and entered the building. Akshay slipped out of there. He walked in the direction of the Gul-mohar tree behind which I was hiding.

“How did I do?”

“You were good. I am impressed.”

“Thanks. I always had a special interest in dramatics.”

“I can see that.”

“Now what next?”

“Nothing. We go home.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“Yeah. Sourabh will take care of the rest.”

We reached home. Akshay was still confused as to what was the exact plan was. He wondered how Sourabh gifting Pritha a bouquet of flowers is going to help our case.

Next morning, I got a call.

“Thank you for the flowers.”

It was Pritha on the line.

“What flowers?”

“The orchids. I know you sent them.”

“Hmm... How did you know?”

“They were orchids. You know I am sucker for orchids. And Sourabh isn’t the kind of guy who will gift flowers. He will never spend money on something ‘perishable’.”

I thought to myself - I know her inside out. I had imagined all this in my head last afternoon when I thought of this plan. I knew she would know.

“Hmm...”

“Sourabh, however, acted like he had bought the flowers, as if I wouldn’t be able to see through him,” she said bitterly. Then she continued, “This episode cracks me up though. My boyfriend brings me a bouquet of orchids originally bought for me by my...”

She stopped. She was probably searching for a word that could describe the relationship between us. The silence, though around half a nanosecond was too awkward to be left alone. I tried to fill it with some gibberish.

“I find this whole thing funny too. By the way, did the poor guy realise that you saw through him?”

“No, I didn’t let him know that.” She said; her voice had a hint of sadness in it.

“Good. Don’t fracture the poor guy’s ego. Leave all the fracturing to me.”

She laughed out loud. But her laugh wasn’t as innocent as it always was. She sounded confused, like she didn’t know which side to be on. Should she laugh because some guy who loves her tricked her liar boyfriend, or should she be angry at him? Out of the blue, she asked-

“Dev? Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” I asked.

“What do you wanna prove?”

“You know what I want to prove.”

Both of us went silent. Each wanting the other to break the silence. Each wanting the other to come out in the open. That wasn’t going to happen.

“Dev, I guess it is time for me to go. I have a few patients waiting.”

“Okay. Bye.”

I waited a long time before I heard her phone click.

Sourabh and Pritha walked towards the Mercedes parked in the parking lot. Sourabh's car was parked closest to the exit, after all, he was the Design head, and he could get whatever spot he wanted.

That day, again, Sourabh left early. He was doing this leaving early thingy a lot lately. He was probably going to take Pritha shopping. I guessed that when I saw her leaving the office premises around the same time as him. I followed them as they entered the parking lot. I hid behind a pillar outside the parking lot.

He got in the driver's seat. Usually he has a chauffeur to drive him, but today he took the wheel. He zoomed off, torturing the engine. I followed them on my Hero Honda Splendor plus. I have no clear idea why I thought following them was a good idea or what purpose it served. But when you have a bike that gives a mileage as great as the

Splendor, I suggest you ride it. I kept safe distance from his car. The car took a left onto the highway. I followed the car. As soon as he reached the highway, Sourabh put the pedal to the floor, utilising every bit of 160 bhp that the Merc had to offer. I found it difficult keeping track of the Mercedes. He cut lanes and flouted traffic rules like his father owned the Pune highway Corporation, while I maintained lane discipline like I was a nominee for the citizen of the year prize.

The traffic lights near Tambe junction turned red. I stopped. Sourabh raced ahead anyway. After the lights turned green, I realised I had lost them.

I had no idea why I was following them or what I was going to do once I caught up with them. But I gathered enough courage to suppress my rule abiding self and unleash the monster. Dramatic, eh? I cranked my wrist, shifted into the top gear. I raced past cars, cutting lanes at will. I was driving around

100 kmph. I had never gone that fast. It seemed that adrenaline, not blood, ran through my veins. I cut through thickening evening traffic and there it was- the gleaming white merc, at a distance of around 50 feet. He took a right and entered the parking-lot of Central mall. I parked my bike under a tree. I saw them get out of the car. Sourabh walked into the mall in a hurry. Pritha scurried behind him to catch up. I felt sorry for her, but I couldn't dwell on it for long, a plan was taking birth in the strategy department of my brain. I had some of my own shopping to do now.

After I shopped for everything needed for the plan, I returned to the bike. All I had to do now was to set it up. Once done, I waited for Sourabh to come out and get into his car. I had to see the look on his face when he discovers my misdoing. I hid behind the security booth. I was getting better at this hide n

seek game. I had done more hiding in the last couple of days than I had done as a kid.

Sourabh got out of the mall, he walked hurriedly across, not even looking back if Pritha was following him. Maybe he was still mad at her for cancelling on him on Sunday. He had three huge shopping bags in his hand.

Both of them reached the car. He opened the door and was surprised to see a stuffed toy on his seat. Pritha opened the door to find a bouquet of orchids on her side. There was a note inside.

I was trying to find something that was as pretty as you. I couldn't find anything, so I brought something that came a close second. Keep them close to you- that should remind them to be humble.

I am smitten by you, but I didn't forget your friend. I bought something that fit his description too.

Love,

Ved.

Their eyes moved to the stuffed toy on the driver's seat.

"What the fuck? What is this animal? This... It's a donkey!"

"It's an ass!" She said and started laughing.

"What the fuck? Who the fuck is Ved?"

She kept laughing...

"Answer me!"

He looked around frantically to find a prankster. But the prankster was hiding behind the security booth. He called security and gave them a firing. The poor guys hadn't seen me 'plant' stuff in his car. They got a dressing down from Sourabh and a threat that they will lose their jobs by evening.

Sourabh was furious. This small trick had worked wonders. He knew the guy who put in the orchids and the ass in the car was the same guy who sent Pritha flowers the other day. He knew that Pritha, now knew that he

didn't gift the bouquet, it came from this guy- Ved, whoever he was... He came across as a liar and a cheapo who wouldn't think twice before passing off someone else's gift as his own. It made him look bad, not that Pritha didn't know all that about him, its just that now Sourabh knew what she thought about him.

Meanwhile Pritha was laughing her lungs out.

"I said answer me!"

The more he flustered, the more she laughed and the more annoyed he got. I was enjoying this from a safe distance behind the security booth.

"Who is Ved? And what relationship does he share with you?"

That stopped Pritha's laughter like a train stops when the chain is pulled.

"What do you mean?"

"My question is simple. What relationship does this Ved guy share with you?"

“Relationship? I don’t know any guy of that name.”

“Are you sure you had nothing to do with any guy named Ved? No fling? Back in college may be.”

“No.”

“Someone you might have met in Pune?”

Pritha looked at Sourabh in disbelief!

“I can’t believe that you are asking me that! Haven’t you been here all the time?”

“Have I? You came here before I did! You sure you didn’t run into any of your old friends? Maybe one of your doctor friends, someone you had a thing going with?”

Pritha had tears in her beautiful hazel eyes. I felt bad for what I had done. I didn’t expect things to take such an ugly turn. All coaching and chasing be damned, if it makes her cry, I don’t want it.

“I can’t believe you are asking me this, Sourabh. Don’t you know me? You know I am not that kind of girl.”

“Who knows?” Sourabh said that bluntly. Almost as if he meant it. I swear to God, I wanted to pull his goddamn guts out.

“Of all the people, you shouldn’t be the one to talk about chastity,” Pritha said furiously. I could see it in her eyes. She had said something like that to him for the first time.

“I am a man, Pritha. I can do whatever I want. I don’t want my to-be wife banging some Ved asshole.”

“I don’t know any Ved!!! I swear!” Pritha shouted.

She had turned red with anger and shame. Anger because her boyfriend was such a scumbag. Shame because she knew I was hiding somewhere looking at her. I thought of leaving the place. Things had gone out of hand. I had been too naïve to think Sourabh will take this as a joke.

“Swear on God,” Sourabh ordered.

Tears trickled down Pritha’s cheeks. To think that she will swear falsely on her

mother's life, what kind of screwed brain has he got!

"I swear on God."

There was submission in her voice. There was disappointment in her voice. There was a cry for freedom in her voice.

"Good."

He took the stuffed ass and threw it out. Then he went to Pritha's side and took out the bouquet. He placed it below the front tyre. He got into the car and slammed the door shut. He revved the engine; the tyre crushed the bouquet as the purple petals of the flowers flew in every direction. The merc left the parking lot with a screech.

I got on my bike to leave the place. I was pissed at myself. How could I be so stupid? Why did I have to follow them? Why did I have to play that prank? I returned home with a heavy heart. The only good thing about the whole episode was that I realised what levels Sourabh could stoop to. Not that

I didn't know already, but I had really thought he must be good with Pritha. How can anyone not be nice to such a sweet girl!

By the way, if you are wondering who this Ved guy is, then let me tell you he's the inverted form of me. Inverted. Get it?

mmm

Chapter 22

The Confession!

I entered Sourabh's cabin in the morning. He was in a foul mood- acceptable, considering what he had to go through in the past few days.

"When will the Germans be here?" Sourabh growled.

"Their flight has been delayed," I answered.

"Then when do you plan to update me about it?"

I kept quiet.

"Why is their flight late anyway?" he asked.

How the fuck would I know?

“How would I know?” I asked.

“They talk about punctuality all the time, what bullshit... Wait till I take over this firm from them...” Sourabh was talking to himself or something. “So by what time are they supposed to reach here?”

“Around four- five in the evening.” I said.

“Hmm... I see...” he said thoughtfully.

“Are you planning to leave early today?” I asked.

“I was, but will have to reschedule it with Prit...,” he stopped midway. “You can leave. I will call you if I need anything.”

“Okay. I will keep you updated.”

I came out of his cabin and found myself staring at the blank screen again. I was thinking all the time. What did he mean takeover the firm? What was he up to? None of my business, I thought. Pritha, now she was my business.

“Hey Pritha, you waiting for someone?” I asked.

I met Pritha in the parking lot of the office. I wasn't expecting to find her there. Sourabh had gone to the Tulip Star to talk to the German executives of VW Electric AG, the parent Co. of VW Electric, India. Apparently he didn't inform her.

“Sourabh was supposed to pick me up.” She answered.

“Sourabh? Didn't he have to meet those German guys at The Tulip?”

“Oh...”

“Yeah, he has a meeting scheduled since ages. Didn't he tell you?” I was being a prick there.

“Umm, we... We don't discuss work,” she said looking embarrassed. “Besides, the reception of my cell is really bad. Maybe he couldn't connect.”

She kept fumbling to find reasons which would justify him not informing her. I realised that, and said...

“Pritha... It’s okay.”

She didn’t say anything. I tried to cheer her up.

“So should I conveniently assume that you have the evening free?” I asked.

“Umm, yes. Pretty much.” She said sweetly.

“Come on then. I will take you to this lovely place!” I said.

“Dev, I don’t knowww...”

“Come onnn, it will be fun,” I said cutting her statement short.

“Dev, you are such a guy. Okay, I will come.”

Is it true that you tend to walk slower when you are with someone you like? We walked to the parking lot. I kept looking at her as she talked about some love song she had heard the other day. She tried hard not

to look at me while walking. She must have given everything a glance, the cars, the security guard, the guard's shoes, the pole that prevents cars to enter the premises without permission, she looked at everything but me. She tried to avoid my gaze, but I kept looking at her, soaking in her beauty.

The floor of the parking lot was wet. It had rained half an hour ago.

In Pune, sometimes, it rains in the winters. The temperature falls in the evening, and the water vapour in the air condenses to form rain. I am an engineer, I have to explain something as romantic as the winter rain in the most scientific way possible.

I looked around at the light green of the trees. The air had that scent of soil freshly drenched. How numb towards the surroundings I get when I am with her, I thought to myself. It's like I am in another world altogether. I saw the green lawn and the yellow marigolds in the garden, how lovely they

looked. I looked at her, her curls falling on her face, she had to keep tucking her hair behind her ear. How I wanted to touch her.

She looked at me. I could sense a question hiding in her.

“Is that place where you are taking me nearby? I would love to walk...”

Well, I would want to walk to the end of the world with her if I could.

“Umm... It is not that far, we can walk, but it will take us some time. I suggest we go there by my bike.” I said pointing to my bike in the distance.

Pritha looked like she saw a ghost.

“Bike? You know how dangerous those things are? They skid on wet roads.”

Too much Mercedes travel does that to you.

“Well, when was the last time you had a ride on one?” I asked.

“Last time? I don’t remember. Must be when I was a kid.”

“Well, guess what kid? Today is your lucky day.”

I held her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. We walked to the bike. I cranked the engine and let it roar.

“Hop on Doctor!”

“You sure?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

With little difficulty she sat on the back seat. She sat with both legs on one side, like ladies did in the ‘80s when saree was the most preferred dress. She grabbed the steel ridge above the tail lights. She held on to it tight.

“Ready miss?”

“Okay.”

I raced out of there on to the highway. I picked speed once I was on the highway.

“Please- don’t- speed- much,” It was difficult to hear her over all the wind.

“What? Why? You scared?”

“Yes. A lot,” she shouted.

“Then leave the steel ridge and hold my shoulder.”

“What? I-can’t-hear-you.”

“I said hold-on-to-my-shoulder.”

She let go of the ridge and grabbed my shoulder tight. I must have driven over a pothole because of which the bike wobbled a little. She got scared and put her arm across my chest. She held me on tightly at first, then slowly relaxing her grip, but still keeping it firm all the time. I raised the accelerator; the bike touched a healthy 80 kmph. Pritha placed her head on the back of my shoulder.

We reached the foot of Ram tekdi- A small hillock near the sparsely crowded Lonavala village. Ram tekdi is quite a sight in the rains. The clouds fly so low, you can almost touch them. The wind brings with itself, tiny droplets of water, which when touch your face, make you feel close to nature.

I killed the engine.

Pritha was still not ready to let go of me. She had closed her eyes out of fear.

“You can open your eyes now,” I whispered in her ear.

She opened her lovely hazel eyes slowly. She looked around slowly. A smile appeared on her lips. She looked at the foothills and said-

“It’s so... so green.”

She looked at the hilltop and said-

“Look at those clouds! They are touching the hilltop. Can we go there Dev? Please. Please.”

It’s amazing how natural beauty can turn a full grown beauty into a kid.

“That is the plan,” I said.

We went up the hill, with me leading the way. I held her hand when she had to jump over a puddle or stuff. We walked over stones and crossed small streams. There was this particular patch where it was very slippery. Pritha slipped and I caught her by the

waist. Girls are so light. And they are so soft. I helped her back on her feet.

“I... I slipped,” she said, like I didn’t notice it. “These sandals don’t have a good grip.”

Pritha was wearing her office sandals. These office sandals women wear are awfully tight and offer no grip. I asked her if she wanted to remove them. She wanted to. I removed my shoes too so that she wouldn’t feel weird walking around barefoot.

When we reached the hilltop, the sun was setting. Obviously we couldn’t see the sun because it was all foggy up there. The sky was Golden yellow- Nature’s very own soft light bulb. We were still holding hands trying not to get lost in the clouds.

“It’s lovely up here,” she said, holding my hand tight.

“Sure is,” I said looking at her.

We found a rock we could sit on and see the sky change colours. It was chilly up there.

We were wearing the same cotton clothes that we had worn over the summer. They were in no way equipped to handle the chill of the first Pune rains.

“It’s kinda cold up here,” she said.

“Come here,” I pulled her near me, I rubbed my palms on her arms to make her warm.

“Thanks for coming,” she said out of the blue.

“For coming here?” I asked.

“For coming into my life.”

I kept looking at her. What would I give to hear that!

We were sitting close to each other. I had my arm over her shoulder.

“You remember Karan?” she asked out of the blue.

“Karan? Karan Hasija?” I asked.

“Yeah... him.”

Karan Hasija was the most notorious guy, the sixth grade has ever known. He was in

our class when we were in the sixth grade. He flunked the sixth grade and his dad took him out of our school and put him somewhere else. Never heard about him after that.

“What about him?” I asked.

“You remember that craft period, when Karan took a scissor...”

“And cut your pony tail?” I offered to finish her sentence. “How can I forget? You had such lovely hair.”

“Hmm... I had such long hair. I remember how furious you were at him.”

“I punched him a couple of times, I guess.”

“Couple? You threw an array of punches,” saying that she playfully punched my bicep.

I don’t get girls.

“I had never seen you so hostile; you were such a mild mannered, shy guy.” She said lovingly.

“Shy? Look who’s talking. Your main aim in school was to keep out of 1 meter radius off me.”

“Well, Mr. Dev, you are such a guy. Didn’t you realise I liked you and would get tongue tied around you,” she placed her head on my shoulders.

“You liked me?”

It was a question I had asked myself a lot of times.

“I still like you,” she said looking into my eyes.

I got lost in her eyes. I brought myself closer to her. She closed her eyes. I closed mine. She parted her soft, full lips. I know how they show it in the movies, the guy kisses the girl softly, once or twice then the scene changes. But that’s not what happens. The scene doesn’t change; you don’t allow the scene to change. I kissed her, first hesitantly, then with all the love that was bottled within us since the last 12 years. The unsaid

love confessions that should have come out 12 years ago, found their voice through our kisses. Our gentle kisses grew animalistic. I kept kissing her, trying to make up for all the lost time.

“I love you.” I said amidst kisses.

“I love you too, Dev. I love you too.” She said, kissing me all the time. “What took you so long?”

I didn’t have an answer to that. What took me so long? The fear of rejection? Or the lack of experience with girls?

We kept kissing till the sun set and it was dark and we started to hear weird noises of seemingly dangerous animals. Not wanting to be leopard meat on the first day of our love lives, we decided to get to the foot of the hill.

Ram tekdi is sparsely populated. There was no one around when we reached the bike. She sat on the bike. I brought her close to me and we kissed again... It must have

gone on for around half an hour or so. We stopped only to breathe, sometimes, not even to breathe.

After we were sure we made up for a few years of lost time, we decided to leave. I kicked the bike into action. Right then, Pritha's cell phone rang-

Sourabh Mehrotra calling

She pressed the reject button.

mmm

Chapter 23

Why does it Rain?

I fell on the bed. I was high. The smile on my face refused to leave. I closed my eyes to play and replay the kiss- our first kiss. How old had I been when I first thought about our first kiss.

I opened my eyes to find three ugly faces staring at me. All eyes asking one question – “What happened?”

“She said yes.”

“Yes to what?” Umesh asked.

“What did you tell her?” Kunal could hardly contain the excitement.

“I told her that I love her. She said she loved me too.”

There was silence for a split second.

“Hahaha... Don’t you guys get it? He is kidding,” Akshay said.

Can’t blame him, two weeks ago, even I wouldn’t have believed that Pritha could say that she loved me. Forget Pritha, I wouldn’t be able to believe that at the end of two weeks I would have the guts to tell her what I had in my heart.

“It’s true guys... She said she, loved me.”

“On her own?” Umesh asked, dumbfounded.

“No, I forced it out of her. I gave her 3rd degree. What nonsense, of course on her own,” my ego was a little hurt. Come on, I am not that bad, so what if not many girls like me, but she did, and that was enough.

I gave them time to digest this bit of information.

“You mean to say, you did it?” Akshay asked bewildered.

“Yes!”

“Whoo hoo...” Akshay yelled.

“Party party...” Kunal jumped like a drunk monkey.

“Aaj mere yaar ki shaadi hai... Aaj mere yaar ki shaadi hai...,” Umesh started singing. Thankfully, it wasn't Kumar Sanu.

“Tell us everything,” Akshay said as he poured vodka in Styrofoam glasses.

As goes with close friends, it was great fun. As it goes with close friends, they wanted all the details. As goes with close friends, they were happy for me more than I was.

Why is, that everyone starts behaving in a different way, once you are in love? You walk on the street and you have girls smiling at

you. Old pensioners pat you on the head as you pass by them. The shopkeeper you have been buying your groceries from, smiles at you for the first time in months, as he packs the groceries. The bus conductor doesn't crib about tendering exact change. And you wonder why everyone is so nice to you, till you notice the smile on your face which refuses to leave. No wonder everyone smiles back. Life is beautiful, isn't it?

I reach office; Pallavi was the first one to pull my leg.

"Someone's got some last night."

I am the only guy Pallavi is friends with in the office. She is the only one in the office who knows about my love for Pritha. The point being, she is allowed to pull my leg. But don't expect me not to answer her.

"Some??? Well I got a lot, girlie."

We laughed at that.

I sat on my chair. For the first time in weeks I felt like working. I liked my job. I

liked designing on ProE. But amidst all this change around me, my work got neglected. I checked on all the parts that were designed by the trainees under me. Thankfully all of them had completed their work properly. I had to assemble the parts on the software and check if it worked alright.

All this while that I was working, I sub-consciously kept thinking about Pritha. I looked out of the window - a light drizzle. It drizzles when someone up there forgets to turn off the shower completely.

I kept looking at the green of the lawn. A sparrow had taken shelter under the leaves of a mango tree. It shook its wings dry.

The worst part about working for an MNC is the air-conditioned environs. Sometimes when it is raining, you don't even realise it because of the monotonous hum of the AC. You don't get to experience the sweet smell of soil when the rain first kisses it.

I thought about Pritha. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to kiss her. We were only a floor apart, but seemed like we were on different continents.

I entered Sourabh's cabin.

"My head is painning. I need to go visit the Doctor's office."

"Hmm... We have the monthly meet today. Hope you remember that," Sourabh said without looking up at me.

"I am taking my mobile. You can call me."

I came out of his cabin. I took out my cell and switched it off.

"May I come in doctor?"

She looked at the door, smiling.

"No you may not Mr. Design engineer."

"Oh no, please doctor, check me out. Check me out please."

"Shut uppppp, Dev." She said, trying hard to control her laughter.

I came in and sat on the patients' bed.

"And what brings you here mister?"

“I have had this throbbing pain.”

“Awww...”

Her awww is enough to make any patient better. A beautiful girl like her needn't study medicine, she could have just smiled and cured her patients.

“Yeah. My chest hurts. My heart, I think I have lost it.”

“Oh, I seeeee.”

It felt so good being there with the girl of my dreams. I wanted to kiss her. I looked out of the window. The rain had stopped by now. Clouds of mist filled the lawns.

“It's lovely, isn't it?” I asked.

“Sure is,” she said, looking lovingly at me.

“Come with me.”

“Where?” She asked, surprised.

I held her hand and pulled her towards me. I could smell her perfume, I could feel her warmth, I could hear her breath grow hoarse.

“Follow me,” I whispered in her ear.

Before I had come to meet her, I had met Pallavi to ask about the terrace keys. She directed me to Shravan from housekeeping. Housekeeping was an outsourced department, so I didn't know any guys from that department. But Shravan seemed to be a nice guy. He quickly surrendered the key when I promised him to return the key in a few hours.

I galloped up the stairs. Pritha followed me. There were people going up and down the stairs, but no one could see that she was following me. Usually it's guys like me who follow pretty girls like Pritha, it's never the other way round.

We reached the terrace door. The terrace door was closed. She looked at me with an expression that seemed to ask – “Now what?”

With the style of James Bond, I pulled out the keys out of my back pocket. I opened

the door, pulled her in and closed the door behind her.

We sat on a dry spot we found on the otherwise wet floor of the mosaic tiled terrace floor.

“Wow! This is amazing. I wasn’t expecting this. This is beautiful,” she said adjusting her dupatta.

“You know what else is beautiful?”

“What?” she asked.

“You!”

She looked away trying to hide her smile. I held her chin and gently turned her face towards mine. I kissed her softly on the right cheek, then on the left.

It was chilly up there. It started to drizzle. The wind played with her tresses. She tried to control them, but her tresses had a mind of their own, they refused to stay in place. The wind sprayed water on us. It wet her cotton salwar kameez. Pritha looked lovely with her wet hair. Every single cell in my body

wanted to make her mine. She tied her hair in a bunch, I pulled them open. She looked at me, wondering why I did that. I pulled her towards me and kissed her full, candy flavoured lips.

The rain started to beat down us; I was now on top of her. I was drenched to the bone. Pritha was drenched too, but less than I was, since I shielded her completely. We kissed like there is no tomorrow. I had my hand below her head, so that the rough mosaic tiles wouldn't hurt her. She looked at me, then pulled my hand from behind her and kissed it. I got up, sat on the floor. I rested my back on the wall. She got up, still breathing hard. For some time there, we didn't talk. I thought about all those days I missed her. I remembered all those nights I fought with God for taking her away from me. I thought about the moments I had wished she be with me.

The day I got poor grades in the 10th grade, and then when I topped college in the 12th grade, how I wanted her to be there when I fell sick in the 4th semester during the exams, I wished she'd be there on my graduation.

Being God must be a such a cool job, He takes away all that is good in your life, all that is rightfully yours, but still, when you get that thing back, He is the only one you end up thanking!

While I was lost in my thoughts, Pritha kept staring at me. I caught her staring at me, I looked back at her, and she quickly averted her gaze. I thought to myself – Have things really changed, isn't she the girl from the eighth grade who is still too shy for her eyes are to meet mine.

We kept gazing at the dark clouds as they hurried through the sky. The sky had various shades of gray, like a colour palette has at the end of an art class.

“Why does it rain?” Pritha asked out of the blue.

“You see, the water vapour condenses to form rain,” I answered as honestly as I could. As is evident, I needed a refresher in romance techniques.

“What re, you are such an engineer.”

“Oh! You want the non-technical answer?” I asked. “It rains when the cloud comes to meet his love.”

“His love?”

“He loves the earth. He has never loved anyone except her. He roars and cries with joy when he meets her for the first time every year.”

“He loves her na? Then why does he leave her?”

“He doesn’t leave her Pri, she pushes him away.”

“Why does she push him away?” She asked, her voice falling.

“She likes the sun too. She flirts with him.”

“She does?” she was barely audible.

“Yes.”

“Why does the cloud still love her then?” She asked; her eyes filled with tears.

“Well, the cloud knows... even if she flirts with the sun, her heart only beats for him. He knows it's him, and not the sun, who can keep her happy and give her life.”

A tear unknowingly sneaked out and rolled down my cheek. I continued-

“That is why, even if she pushes him away, he knows how much she loves him, and so he comes back to meet her every year.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks, one after another. It was like the floodgates had been opened.

“How do you know that she loves him? What makes you so sure?”

“Look around – have you seen her greener, happier? Smell that perfume of wet soil, when was the last time she was this beautiful?”

She threw her arms around me and let the pain out. She cried her heart out. Tears rolled down my cheeks too. I had no control over them, they just kept sneaking through. She held me tight, she kept on kissing me, running her fingers through my hair, then it happened, it just came out...

“I love you, Pritha.”

She looked at me, her eyes still moist with tears; she smiled, then laughed, then started crying.

“I love you too, Dev. I love you. I love you.”

I held her tight. The rain beat down on us. The cloud roared above us, he lashed the earth with torrential rain, satisfying her thirst. The cloud and the earth became one. Old lovers reunited.

I swear to God, I have never seen them happier.

mmm

Chapter 24

The Apt Answer!

“Do you realise you are soaking wet?” Pallavi asked me as I reached the reception.

I looked at myself and smiled.

“Mr. Mehrotra just got out of the meeting moments ago. What happened to your cell phone? I tried calling you but it was switched off,” she said.

“Why were you trying to call me?” I asked.

“Why? Don’t you remember you had to be a part of the meeting? He was furious by the way.”

I smiled again. I gave her the keys to the terrace to be forwarded to its rightful owner, Shravan.

I had just entered the design office when I heard a scream – “Devdutt!!”

It was Sourabh.

“Yes,” I replied coolly.

“Where the fuck were you??”

“I believe I told you that I had a headache and had to visit the doctor.”

“For three fucking hours??”

He was swearing at me in front of all the staff. All the trainees who worked under me looked on. Ciggy, who himself used to scream a lot at me, hid his face in his laptop, pretending to work.

“The doctor asked me to lie down, there were sedatives in the medicine that she prescribed.”

“What the? You shitting me Dutt?” He asked angrily.

“Alright now, first of all, Dutt isn’t my surname, my name is Devdutt and my surname is Rastogi, get that right first, second of all, I don’t know what that phrase ‘shitting me’ means...”

Everyone was a little bewildered to see me talking like that to the head of Design, Asia Pacific. I saw a hint of pride in the eyes of the trainees who worked under me. Ciggy slowly turned his head away from the laptop to look at me.

“I... I...,” for probably the first time in his life, Sourabh fumbled, but he quickly regained composure- “I mean you are fooling me, and why in hell are your clothes wet?”

Okay. He got me there. I had to come up with an answer... fast.

“It’s sweat. I am sweating...” I said.

It was an obvious lie. Even someone with an IQ equal to that of Rakhi Sawant would have known I was lying. I was out in the rain, it was extremely evident.

Had there been any girls in our department, I would be increasingly embarrassed to say such a thing. But the only thing that had any feminine characteristics in our

department was Shalindera, the new trainee, famously known as 'Shanno'.

"Sweating? Do you think I am an ass?"

"I don't think you are an ass, sir (I know you are!). But I was given certain medicines which increase your BMR and you tend to sweat more."

For the first time in my life, I was happy I had taken biology in my 12th grade.

Sourabh kept looking at my expressionless face, trying to gauge something... When he couldn't, he turned around and entered his cabin.

I sank in my chair. I have always sucked at lying. My parents always caught me when I lied, so did my friends and teachers. As I grew up, I grew worse at lying. But today, a lot was at stake and thankfully (and hopefully) Sourabh bought my lies. I was emotionally drained and tired. Back answering can be so damn difficult. How Sourabh can shout at people, make them feel little and

miserable, everyday, day after day, escapes me.

As I was thinking about all that, Sourabh came out of his cabin with his office bag in his hand and stomped out of the office. The trainees looked at each other, eyes big as saucers, like they had just heard a hurricane warning.

Ciggy got up from his chair and came to me. I stood up. I am the kind of guy who stands if his senior is standing, it's not ass-kissing, it's the plain respect I have for them.

Ciggy pressed my arm. I looked at his hand on my arm and then at his moist eyes.

"Thank you," he said.

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Chapter 25

Sourabh Knows!

"Good morning, Pallavi."

"Good morning, Dev."

Her 'Good morning' didn't pack the punch that it always did.

“Something wrong girlie?” I asked.

“Ugh, no... no, nothing’s wrong,” she answered hesitantly.

I decided not to probe further. I knew she will talk when she feels like. Something told me that, I knew what she was bothered by.

Sourabh didn’t come to office that morning. Usually, when he took a day off, he would inform Ciggy and make him in-charge. Then the next day, he would take his case and spend half the morning yelling at him. Today he didn’t even call Ciggy.

I had spent last night dreaming about Pritha. My thoughts kept going back to the time we spent on the terrace. How these moments were engraved in my soul. How she felt a part of me. What would I not do to keep her happy? If this isn’t love, tell me, what is!

All day long I worked on all lagging projects. The good thing about working in a niche company, is that you learn fast since

there are limited number of things to learn, effectively speaking, you become an expert pretty quick. I call it a niche company, because we made transformers, and not many companies in the world can manufacture quality transformers.

Now, the expert in me took charge and I completed my work at lightning speed. I was also buoyed by my performance in yesterday's 'chit-chat' with Sourabh.

Sourabh came in around three in the afternoon. Instead of his usual suits, today, he wore an Emporio Armani T-shirt which was last ironed back in 1997 and jeans washed in the same year. He hadn't applied gel to his hair like he normally did. He wore a disheveled look. His bloodshot eyes indicated over consumption of tequila last night and early this morning. He didn't carry his office bag. He was lost within himself. He entered his cabin without saying a word to anyone; he didn't even as much give anyone

as much as a glance. In his cabin, he slept through the afternoon with his head on the desk.

Around five when I was packing my bag to leave, Sourabh woke up. He came up to my desk. I kept sitting on my chair.

“You are going to wait today,” he said in a heavy voice.

“Why?” I asked bluntly.

“Because I want to discuss the WB Transformer project.”

“What WB project? We completed it ages ago,” I said.

“Then what are you working on?”

“Orissa Electricity Board.”

“Then I want to talk about that,” he said with voice that was fumbling.

I could smell the alcohol in his breath.

“Okay.” I said.

Sourabh turned around and fumbled back to his cabin.

At around seven in the evening, when everyone had left, I entered his cabin. Sourabh has his head on his desk.

“Sourabh?” I called out.

He lifted his head up from the desk, slowly opening his eyes. He looked at me as if he wanted to know what I was doing in his bedroom. I sat in the chair. It took him some time to realise we weren't in his apartment.

He got up and sat on the desk, his long legs dangling. He removed a shiny flat steel bottle, the kind they use to store alcohol, and drank from it. After a generous gulp, he spoke-

“Mr. Devdutt Rastogi.”

Contrary to women, when men use that salutation, it means they want to screw you bad.

“Yes sir.”

“Weren't you in my school?” he asked.

“Yes. We were in the same school.”

“You know, a funny thing happened today,” Sourabh looked at me, half smiling, half, well, drunk. “I was thinking about our school days. You remember Rajani?”

“Rajani madam?” I asked.

“Yeah. She was such a babe. Oh her curves, and that sweet ass.” He said with a lecherous smile pasted on his face.

“Shut the fuck up, Sourabh.” I glared at him. “You are drunk. Do yourself a favour, go home.”

Now I do agree Rajani madam was pretty and everything, and horny little bastards like us did check her out, but to speak of your teacher like that just shows what a nasty bastard you are.

“Hmmmm... You were her favourite, weren't you? ” Sourabh asked.

I kept silent. Sourabh took another gulp from the steel bottle.

“Dev, what is this about? Is this about the time I bullied you in school?”

“What are you talking about, Sourabh?” I asked bewildered.

“You really thought I will buy your sweating shit?”

“Sweating?”

“Your wet clothes.”

“What about them?” I asked.

“Even Pritha’s clothes were wet.” Sourabh looked at me, madness peeking from behind his bloodshot eyes. “You really thought I won’t find out? I have been researching a lot about you two lately. You guys sneaked a lot behind my back, I noticed.”

I sank into my chair. Good that he knew now. No need to play hide and seek now.

Sourabh was now pacing up and down the cabin. He fumbled quite a few times in the process.

“So how is she?” He asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

“How is she in bed? Sweet? Does she moan?”

“Shut up.”

“What? Why so serious mate?”

Sourabh took another gulp.

“Quite a rack she got. Gotta squeeze them balls. ”

“Fuck you.”

“No, fuck you. And fuck her.” Sourabh shuddered. “Only if it wasn’t for my old man. I told him we don’t need Pritha’s dad to get our deals through. Shanti will work even without Bakshi, the old cunt.”

“Shanti? Shanti steel and electrical. How are you related to...”

“None of your fucking business, sweetie.” He sent me a flying kiss. “What you should be concerned about is your job.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean, Mr. Devdutt Rastogi, is that if you don’t keep off my fiancé, I will screw your career. I mean S-C-R-E-W.”

“You can’t do that!” I felt a hint of a shiver in my voice.

“You know I can.”

The truth is that he could. That happens to be the most negative aspect of working for a niche company. There are only a few other companies in the world which manufacture transformers. They wouldn't want me on board if the continent head of design says nasty stuff about me. Sure, I could work in a company that manufactured something else, but there I will have to work as a fresh entrant. Also, there is no guarantee that I will be safe there, Sourabh's father is a powerful man, he can get me out of any company.

I was lost in my string of thoughts, when Sourabh spoke again.

“You know, I can. Did you know it was my dad who fucked your dad's career?”

I don't know if it was the way he said it that blew off my safety valve or was it because he used the F word in relation to my dad, but I was damn angry. My fists were

clenched. I was gritting my teeth. I would have knocked the daylights out of him then, but that would be too small a punishment.

“You are an asshole, Sourabh. Did you know that?” I said smiling.

“I kinda did,” he replied

“Well, I will tell you something that you didn’t. I love Pritha. And I will love her till the end of this world. Do whatever you can to stop me. Get help from you daddy waddy you ass, ‘cause I am not going down easy.”

Sourabh jolted out of his drunken state. I continued.

“I assure you, you fucking son of a weasel... I will take my father’s revenge... with interest... compounded annually.”

I got up and started to leave.

“If you do anything nasty, not that you can,” this time, he had a shiver in his voice, “but even if you try, I will hurt her bad.”

After all that I had heard from the gutter of his mouth, this comment of his still

shocked me. Pritha's father really wanted to marry her off to this demon?

"You know what Sourabh, she'd rather die than marry you."

I stormed out of his room.

Once out of the office, I called Pritha.

"Hello?"

"Sourabh knows about us." I said.

"He does? What makes you think so?" She asked.

"He told me so."

"What?"

"Don't have time to explain, look, keep away from him, will ya?" I was walking faster as I was saying this.

"Dev? What happened? Please tell me."

"Stay aaaway. All right?"

"Dev, our engagement ... it's next month."

I stopped in my tracks. I went tongue tied. When was she going to tell me?

mmm

Chapter 26

The 'Potato' Theory

I stopped in my tracks. I went tongue tied. When was she going to tell me?

“What? When? When was this decided? When were you going to tell me?”

“Uncle and dad decided last month.”

“What?”

“Uncle is having a party to celebrate their company's performance.”

“What? What company? And what does all of this have to do with your engagement to that asshole?” I was confused and fuming at the same time.

“Uncle's company - Shanti electricals. They are going to announce our engagement and exchange rings. ”

“Just like that? Wait a minute,” I said. It was a Eureka moment. “What company did you say?”

“Shanti electricals. Why?”

“Hmm... nothing.” I started thinking. “Don't worry. I will take care of that.”

“I don’t want to get engaged, Dev.”

I could hear her sob softly. My heart melted.

“You won’t have to. I promise.”

I disconnected the call.

Walking back home, I kept thinking about what Pritha had said - Uncle’s company - Shanti electricals.

Inderjit Mehrotra, Sourabh’s father, owned the Shanti electricals! No wonder then, Sourabh wanted VW Electric to get all spares, bushings, connectors from Shanti electricals. Shanti electricals was infamous enough for its poor quality. No engineer in the right state of mind would suggest Shanti as a supplier. Not only did Shanti deal with poor quality, it also priced its products at a premium. I always wondered why that company hadn’t shut down yet. Now I knew, Inderjit must have had his relatives in most electrical firms. They must have loyally

ordered electrical products from him and that too, at premium prices.

Assholes all of them.

They compromise quality, just so that they could make more money. And then we wonder, why India's name doesn't feature in the names of the developed countries. Everyone, right from the grassroots' level to the top is corrupted. Everyone has his hands stained. No one wants to make it right. Everyone is a part of the system which pulls India back.

You know how it works?

Sourabh buys costly spares from Shanti filling Inderjit Mehrotra's pockets. Due to use of costly, but substandard spares, the transformer is sold at a high price to the Government. This transformer then lights up a town in West Bengal. But since the quality is poor, it breaks down. And there is nobody to attend to it. The town receives

intermittent power supply if it's lucky, if it's not, they have to contend with complete darkness.

Who wins in all this? – goons like Inderjit Mehrotra and Sourabh Mehrotra and their relatives in the Ministry of Power.

Who loses? VW Electric and the Government. That means – You. You, who invested in VW Electric on the stock market and You, who paid your taxes to the government.

I had to do something about it. I strictly believe that if your aren't against the system, you are a part of it. I didn't want to be a part of this scam. I didn't want to be a scumbag like them.

Know how it is when you are in a bar, and you get into a fight with the biggest man in the bar? Well, I didn't... till I hadn't decided to sort this shit out for myself.

I came home. I sat on my bed. The guys had gone out for a movie. I was all alone.

What could I do? I don't remember when I must have slept off.

When I woke up it was 2'o clock in the night. Kunal and Umesh had returned from the movie. Kunal was sleeping beside me. He had the pillow between his legs and had a vice-like grip over it.

An idea struck.

"Kunal... Kunal..." I woke Kunal up...

"Dude... I was in the middle of such a lovely dream... I almost had her..." Kunal mumbled.

"Your father works for the Income Tax department, right?" I asked.

"Son of a gun, Dev... It's 2 in the morning... Can we discuss our respective Pap-pas business in the morning?"

"No dude... I need his help..." I said.

Kunal woke up startled.

"What do you need his help for? You in the diamond trading business?"

"No," said I.

“Stock broking business?”

“No.”

“Hawala transfer?”

“Nooo. What’s Hawala anyway?”

I had heard that term on the news a lot of times, but I didn’t know what it meant. Somehow it always reminded of ‘halwa’ a sweet my grandmother used to make.

“Dude, lets discuss terms and definitions tomorrow morning... OK?” Kunal was visibly irritated.

“I need your father’s help. It’s about Pritha.”

“Oh...” said Kunal, “her father is a diamond trader?”

“No.”

“Stock Broker?”

“No. dude, wait. It’s about VW Electric. It’s huge. You have to let him know.” I stopped his array of Kaun banega crorepati questions in their track.

“Okay... Okay... Will call him in the morning... Now let me go back to my Smitha...”

Saying this, he put the pillow back between his legs. I made a note of what pillow he uses. I wanted to make sure, I wasn't within 10 feet radius of that pillow.

In the morning I told Kunal everything about how Sourabh made me change the suppliers. I had standardised the suppliers for connectors. I was made to change that and buy the items from Shanti electricals at double the cost. That means he made VW Electric suffer a loss by transferring more money to Shanti electricals. I explained everything to him.

Kunal failed to understand how it was big. He thought it was quite an ordinary, everyday case. I had to explain him in detail-

Shanti was Sourabh's father's company. So, in effect, Sourabh transferred money from VW to Shanti. I don't know the

legalities and stuff, but it is very clear that this is wrong. VW Electric is a listed company. So a lot of public money is invested in VW. That means, guys like you, your neighbour, your uncle might have bought the shares. Now when money gets transferred from VW to Shanti, it means your money, your neighbour's or your uncle's money is being shifted to the bank accounts of Sourabh's father. This has to be illegal, right?

“Dude, do we have any proof about this stuff?” Kunal asked. For someone who has a pillow for a girlfriend, Kunal asked a real good question.

“Umm... no. I mean, the balance sheets or whatever those company statements are, will be available on the intranet.” I said. But even I knew that those company financials are doctored.

“We need the original copy, the one which Sourabh and the auditors fixed.” Kunal said.

Now, had Shravan not been a part of this story, it would have ended here. Shravan was the same guy from whom Pallavi got me the terrace keys, you know, so that I and Pritha could spend some... you know... time together. There is no way anyone could have got those papers from the CFO's cabin, except Shravan of course.

It was simple really. All I had asked Shravan to do was to open any locked drawers in his cabin and take whatever papers or files there were inside.

I assumed, since it is the real data of the company, but the management doesn't want anyone to see that data, there must only be hard copies of the financials. In case of emergency or the scam being exposed, the hard copies can be torn and burnt while the soft copies might always leave behind some residue which the computer whiz kids of the Income Tax department might find.

Shravan found only one locked drawer which he opened with a sort of master key that he had. He found an old file with torn edges inside. He brought that to me. I gave him a small amount as appreciation. Small amount, in the terms of the magnitude of work he had done.

Kunal called his father. It was almost a year since he had called him. I was thankful to Kunal for this gesture. Kunal's father asked us to visit him in his office.

"This is crazy. Look at this. This is rigged." Kunal's father was fuming. He had the old torn file in his hand.

Kunal's father was a big man and chewed betel leaf. His lips were red, but not red like Aamir Khan; they were more like Rishi Kapoor red, like flaming red. But he had something about him which said -B-R-I-L-L-I-A-N-T in capital letters.

Uncle's office was big and messy. There were papers full of racks, or was it the other

way round? There were pictures of famous people on the walls. In all those pictures stood uncle, next to the famous people, smiling his tobacco tainted smile. There was a picture of Akshay Kumar, shaking hands with uncle. Akshay Kumar was receiving the award for paying his taxes on time. There were photos of uncle and the Governor of RBI, uncle and president of SEBI, uncle and CFO of Infosys.

I guessed the papers in his hand must be the balance sheet or profit and loss account of the company or something. Kunal's father seemed flabbergasted looking at the papers. It was like somebody told him that all pan shops are going to remain shut for a week or something.

"I should bring this to the notice of my friends who work in SEBI."

This told me it was getting serious. I looked at Kunal. He was as confused as me, if not more.

“What is going on Pappa? ” Kunal asked hesitantly. And who the hell calls their dad, pappa? Not papa, but pap-pa.

“What? You don’t get it? I understand your friend here doesn’t get what is going on, he must have taken engineering or something like that in college, but you, you toh took Commerce. You should understand.”

He made engineering sound so lowly.

Kunal looked at the sheets. The blank look refused to leave. Kunal cleared B Com in the second attempt.

“Arre, see here no, the profit growth over last year...”

Kunal’s dad then explained to him the details of the sheets. I just sat in the corner and tried to understand stuff... I didn’t get even a single word they said...

I could hear a few words in between, like –shares price, fraud, Pap-pa, SEBI, share market, etc. I could also understand a few

sentences by Kunal's dad – 'You are such a dumbass', 'Why didn't you study properly in college', 'You don't even know this?', etc.

After he was done explaining the stuff to Kunal, Kunal's dad turned his attention to me. I was scared. I had never been called dumbass before.

"Do you understand?" He asked putting a paan in his mouth.

"Umm... umm... yes," I lied.

"No you didn't! Don't lie. Come here. I will explain slowly. Like I explain it to layman."

He made me feel like a dumbass without saying it explicitly.

He stood up, with his hands in the pocket. Like an actor getting ready for a stage performance, he fixed his hair. With his mouth full of paan he began.....

Have you seen a potato vendor? Let's call him Laxman. How does Laxman start his business? He finds some partners who invest

in his business. They are usually money lenders.

He uses the money of the moneylender to buy some potatoes from a farmer. He keeps these potatoes in the store-room of his shop. He sells the potatoes to the villagers at a price slightly higher than the price at which he bought them, hence making a profit. The profit is shared between the moneylenders and himself.

Now, one day, rats eat up Laxman's stock. Laxman can't sell his goods, hence can't make a profit. Now if moneylenders get to know this, they would be furious and wouldn't lend him any more money. So he tells them that he will share the profit weekly instead of daily. He assumes that he will make enough profit in the week and adjust the loss of spoilt potatoes against it.

He will accordingly pay the adjusted profits to the moneylenders. Thus he made

sure that he alone didn't have to bear the brunt of the loss of the spoilt potatoes.

"Hmm," I said, "But how exactly is this related to Shanti electicals? Who is Laxman in this case? Sourabh? Or is he the potato?"

He continued-

I am not done with the story yet. Continuing – What happens to Laxman if in a week, out of 7 days, the rats eat up his stock for 5 days in a row. Now at the end of the week, he has accumulated 5 days of losses against 2 days of profits – resulting in a net loss.

The moneylenders want their money. They have invested in a week's stock of Laxman's potatoes. But Laxman has no money. He has made a net loss. What can Laxman do? He can request the moneylenders to change the payment cycle to per month. The moneylenders might agree. But they want to see how much profit Laxman made in the

last 7 days. In other words, they want to check the financials of his business.

Now, if Laxman shows loss in his books, the moneylenders stop the investments. So Laxman cooks up the books. Showing profits where there are none, hoping that he will make profits in the future which will offset these losses. But it never happens. He is now riding a tiger. He doesn't know how to get down without being eaten up.

“But,” I said, “Where does Shanti electricals figure in this?”

“Well,” said Kunal's dad with a long sigh, “Von Wahl Electrical is the Laxman here.”

“Huh?” I exclaimed. Where did Von Wahl Electrical come in from? “I thought we were talking about Shanti here.” I said.

“Both are related,” he said. “Both companies are related. Mehrotra's men have a huge stake in VW Electrical. Years ago, VW Germany offloaded their shares and

consequently the control of the company went to Mehrotra.”

“Why would they do that?” I asked bewildered.

I didn’t know the details of who has a stake in which company. Every year, the employees get an email from the finance department, which as an attachment includes the financials of the company. However, employees don’t usually pay much attention to the Balance Sheet or Profit and Loss sheet. I wouldn’t be able to understand the difference between the two even if my promotion depended on it.

“Well, VW were making huge losses in India that time. They failed to get any order because the good orders always went to the companies who had their men in the Ministry of Power.” Kunal’s pappa explained.

“And Mehrotra had connections. Pritha’s father is one of those connections.” I said,

solving the puzzle, things becoming clear, slowly but surely.

“Yes. You are right. He had men in the Power Ministry. He used them to get orders for VW Electrical after he gained control. The profit made was shared with VW Germany. Everyone was happy. Except Mehrotra of course. He wanted more.”

He placed a paan in his mouth.

“Mehrotra remained a non-executive member of the board of directors. But he filled the company with his people - His wife's relatives, old friends, relatives of the people from the Power Ministry.”

Maybe that is why Pritha was chosen for the job, I thought. Her father was Mehrotra's friend. And that is why a kid like Sourabh was made the continent head with a Mercedes and corner office and all...

“VW Electrical made huge profits after it went public. These profits were real, buoyed by the huge number of projects it got from

the Power Ministry.” Kunal’s dad sat on the chair, tired from all the animated talking he had been doing. “But then, the government changed and so did the people in the ministry. The profits ran dry. However showing poor profits to the people would mean a dip in the share prices, so he cooked up the books. Showing profits where there was none.”

I was amazed at how much information is embedded in those sheets called balance sheets.

“VW’s balance sheet were grossly unbalanced. After five years, as the government changed, and Mehrotra’s people came in power, the profits grew huge. He could now cover up his losses, but he didn’t. He continued cooking up the figures. The profits were siphoned off to Shanti electricals.”

“Yes they were!” I said.

Everything became clear. That is why Sourabh had a Merc from the office. He was

a part owner of the firm! He was making his dad and himself rich day by day, sucking blood out of Von Wahl. The problem was, VW's money wasn't its own. It was the money invested by thousands of investors. It was public money. Public money was being siphoned to their personal bank accounts.

"In a few months, I am sure; Shanti will come out with an IPO of its own. It has made huge profits of late, thanks to VW. Public likes companies that make huge profits. They will invest money in Shanti, making Mehrotra richer and more powerful."

"I didn't get one thing, pappa." Kunal said. "Mehrotras have stake in both the firms. What is the point in making one firm richer at the cost of the other?"

"I wish you had worked harder during your degree," Kunal's father said.

I was glad I didn't ask the question, because I had the same doubt too. Kunal's pappa answered,

“You see, Mehrotra’s stake in VW is around 51 per cent, but his stake in Shanti is much higher. If VW goes bankrupt in a few months, which in all probability it will, at the expense of making Shanti richer, Mehrotra will take that any day.”

It became crystal clear. I personally never invested in the share market, but I felt bad for people who invested their hard earned money in VW. They could lose their money any day now.

“What can we do about this whole situation?” I asked Kunal’s dad.

“A lot of things, inform SEBI, inform the IT department, and get the books re-audited.”

We needed time to think. We left Kunal’s dad behind and came back home.

I made coffee for both of us. Kunal was in a somber mood. It was pretty obvious considering the fact he got called ‘dumbass’ around 27 times in a day.

“So what do you think? What you gonna do?” Kunal asked.

“I want to expose this quick. I don’t have the time to go through the never ending process of government institutes.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I want the media to know about this.”

“Why will the media be interested?” Kunal asked.

“It involved public money, right? Media is always hungry for such stuff.”

“Do you know anyone in the media?” Kunal asked.

“I do.” It was Akshay. He came out of his room rubbing his eyes, as he entered from the dark bedroom to the tubelight lit living room. “A friend of mine works with PNTV. She is the assistant editor.”

“Really?” Kunal asked. “Is she hot?”

Even in times of such crisis, Kunal couldn’t keep his hormones in check.

“Well... umm, I wouldn't say she is not hot,” Akshay replied.

“Will you guys shut up?” I was getting impatient. “Akshay, can she help us?”

“I don't know yaar, will have to ask her. But we can discuss this with her. Let's see how it goes. We are not on the best terms. I used to go out with her. Let's see how it goes.”

More often than not, Akshay was increasingly confident. Not this time. Anyway, he called the girl up and she agreed to meet us.

mmm

Chapter 27

Pritha's Reaction

I found myself sitting opposite to Sonia Goel, the assistant editor at PNTV. PNTV was the third most watched news channel in the state. Going by the size of Sonia's office and her dressing sense, I could easily infer that she was important. How did such intellectual types end up with Akshay?

Akshay sat to my right. Kunal to my left. We started explaining things to her about how Shanti and VW were duping the investors and how the ministry and the auditors were a part of this fraud. We tried to explain stuff to her in the same way Kunal's pappa did. At one point I also gave her the example of potatoes, but she made me skip it.

She was extremely professional. Sharp and precise, not only in her mannerisms but also in the way she dressed. She was wearing a business suit. She wore a specs and had her hair tied in a bun. She spoke in an accent which I believe was British.

"Do you have the financial statements?" she asked.

Kunal handed over the documents to her.

"Hmm... this can be big," she murmured as she flipped the pages of the document. "Have you brought this to SEBI's notice?"

"No," I said looking at Kunal.

“Have you approached any other News channel?”

“No.” That was Akshay’s first word since we entered her office.

She looked at Akshay, she seemed to soften a bit. But she soon regained her composure and continued –

“We will play this story, but you can’t go to SEBI for at least the next 3 days. This will allow our channel to have a lead over other channels when this news becomes public.”

“You mean, you will cover the story?” I asked, amazed by the ease in which all this was done.

“Of course. Umm... if I may ask, what’s your stake in all of this?” she asked me.

“It’s about a girl.” Akshay said.

For some reason his voice sounded distant, like he was in the other corner of the room, or the planet.

“It’s about a girl he loves, you understand that don’t you, Sonia?” Akshay looked straight into her eyes.

Sonia looked into Akshay’s eyes, then like he was the only one in the room, she said to him-

“I am sure I do.”

Her voice shook behind recognition. Maybe even beyond her recognition. She quickly regained her composure or acted like she had.

“It will be done,” she said.

“Thank you.” I said. I got up to leave. Kunal got up too. Akshay kept staring at the floor.

As the three of us left her office, I shut the door of her office behind me.

Few days later, Pritha woke me up from deep slumber early in the morning.

“Pritha? Everything alright?”

“No, nothing is alright. They are saying things about our company,” she said. She sounded confused and for some reason angry.

“Our company? Yes, VW Electric. What are they saying and to whom?”

“PNTV. They are saying our management took investors’ money and siphoned it off to Shanti electricals. Is that true?” She sounded scared.

“Listen, sweetie, meet me at L9 in 20, alright?”

I reached early. The terrace of L9 brought back memories of that date with Pritha. I leaned on the railing, soaking in the beautiful city of Pune. The golden yellow of the morning sun made Pune look even more beautiful. The golden yellow cast long shadows on rooftops... it made the leaves of the trees seem golden.

Pritha reached the reception. She asked something to the lady at the counter, she

pointed towards me. I could see her through the glass doors. She was coming towards me. She came on the terrace and golden yellow sunrays fell on her face. Apparently, Pune wasn't the only thing which the sunrays made look even more beautiful.

She came to me and collapsed in my arms. I held her close to me. She was breathing heavily. I let her get comfortable. She looked at me. I gently stroked her cheeks with the back of my fingers.

"What's wrong sweetie?" I asked.

"They will get my father," she replied.

In my thirst to seek revenge, I had sidelined Pritha's father. To be honest, I didn't think he was of any importance in this case. This was about how public money was being siphoned off by the Mehrotra father-son duo. Any government servant won't figure into this. That was one of the reasons why Sonia was cool with going ahead with this report. Had it been a report against a politician or a

ministry, we would have to go to NDTV or Aaj-Tak or something.

“Oh! Nothing will happen to your dad yaar.” I tried to sound as cool as I could.

“You sure?” she asked. Her big hazel eyes looking at me expectantly.

I gave her an answer she wanted to hear.

“I am damn sure. Now relax okay.” I said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“Hmm... thanks.”

I ordered chocolate milk for both of us.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “How did they come to know about all this?”

“I told them.”

She blurted out a laugh. “Yeah right... and I am running for the President.”

“You are? Now that’s a pretty Prez.”

“Shut up,” she said, half mocking, half serious. “Were you serious there?”

“About the pretty Prez? Every bit,” I joked.

“Noooo, I meant the news part. You did it?”

“Yes I did.”

“Whoa! How? You did... How? And why?”

There was respect in those lovely eyes.

“How- is a long story. Why- is a short one.”

I unfolded my plan before her.

“Mehrotra wanted to get his son married to you so that your father will always be within ‘favour-asking range’. Your father wanted you to get married to Sourabh because he saw him as a potential heir to an ever growing empire. What he didn’t know is the way this empire was built. I wanted to show him exactly that.”

“You could have told him...” she said.

“You think he would have listened? When was the last time he listened to you?”

Pritha lowered her eyes. That statement of mine hurt her. But it was true. Sometimes

you have to let your girl see the truth, no matter how harsh it is.

I held her hand.

“Pritha, I will come to him to ask for your hand one day. I just want him to know that I am capable of keeping you happy. If I can bring down an empire for you, I can build one too.”

“I don’t want any empire. All I want is you,” saying that she kissed me on the cheek.

Women have their own way of making you feel important, don’t they? My girl just chose me over an empire. How cool is that!

Have you noticed how a girl’s kiss can make everything around you so beautiful? I walked back home, half drunk on love. You know you love someone, when you wish you had cloned them and filled your life with them. I wished I had 10 Prithas in my life. That would mean I could have got 10 kisses for the last one.

I reached home calculating every minute I spent with her and multiplying it by 10.

Akshay had just woken up... Ever since he had met Sonia, he was acting weird. Considering all the girlfriends and break-ups he must have had, facing a girl he dated shouldn't be that tough. But apparently it was. And I couldn't tell why...

mmm

Chapter 28

The Fall of an Empire...

It was the beginning of the end. All channels carried small tit-bits regarding VW. Stock price of VW fell fast. By mid-day, VW fell to half its opening price, from Rs.634 to Rs.307.

As the channels gained access to more information, more footage got allotted to the case. Hundreds of investors swarmed into the VW office. They showed all this on TV. Some rumours about VW shutting down started doing rounds by evening. The

workers who worked for VW stopped their work and demanded salaries. Sourabh probably left the city for good. Mehrotra must have been planning to do the same.

“Hello Dev?” It was Pallavi.

“Hi, I hope you are not in the office.” I asked.

“No, I am not. We shut down early today.”

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Yes, a little hazed though, with so many angry people entering our office asking me questions about Sourabh. What has he done wrong?”

“Hmm... good question. Why don’t you hold on a bit. In a few days you will come to know what all wrong he has done.” I was angry at Pallavi’s naivety.

“Do you know something that I don’t?” She asked me, confused.

“Pallavi, there’s probably a lot that I know that you don’t. But don’t lose sleep

over that. Don't attend office for a few days. Think of this as a small vacation."

"Dev, tell me honestly, is Sourabh a bad guy?" She asked. She really liked him. I would too, if he wasn't such an asshole. But he was, so that's that.

"Pallavi, Sourabh is among the worst I have seen." I said. It was time to tell her the truth.

She went mute for some time. Then she said-

"You knew all this time... You didn't tell me. Why?" She felt I had ditched her. In a way I had. But there was a reason for it.

"Pallavi, I have known you since two years now. I have seen 280 different guys in the company hit on you. But not once did I see respect or admiration for any of them in your eyes. But for Sourabh, I saw both respect and admiration in your eyes. I didn't wanna break your heart."

She let out a sigh.

I didn't want to be the one to reveal all this to her. I wished that she would come to know through the news. I guess being a friend is a package deal. You can't just sign up for the good times.

In the meanwhile, Shanti's name got dragged into the case. VW Electric was closed down till further notice. SEBI came into action. The auditors were arrested. The CFO of VW Electric was arrested.

In between, there were a few reports of the Power Minister, Rajabhai Dholakia, being involved too. On being interrogated, Dholakia, obviously denied having anything to do with Shanti, VW Electric, the Mehrotras, their watchman, their driver or their dog. He said he had met Inderjit Mehrotra in a party through a common friend and that's all. The truth is; he spent most his evenings discussing his commission if a certain work order went to VW or Shanti.

The noose was tightening around Mehrotra's neck. The big rats had abandoned the sinking ship. There was no place to go.

While Umesh, Kunal and I were busy planning for celebrations, Akshay stayed locked up in his room most of the time.

I felt bad for him. I felt like I was responsible for his condition.

I caught hold of him one morning...

"Akshay?" I said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing... I just want to brush my teeth."

Men can be so indifferent to the obvious.

"No, I mean, you don't seem to be yourself since a few days. In fact, you haven't been yourself since we met Sonia. What's wrong?" I asked.

"Can't tell you everything, Dev."

"You have to." I said.

"None of your business, Dev. Leave this alone."

His voice was tired. He was annoyed and irritated. He hadn't gone out for over a week now. When men ask their friends to leave them alone, that's what they should do. But I had left this alone for a long time and had no intentions of letting my friend spend the rest of his life locked in his room.

"No Akshay, I won't leave this alone. You have to tell me. Who is this girl? How do you know Sonia? What does she mean to you?"

"And how does it help me telling you about her?"

"I don't know... Sharing helps sometime..."

"Hmm... I don't know what to tell you. I just like her." He said.

"I like her too. She's a nice girl. I am sure Kunal also likes her. But we aren't locking ourselves in our rooms. But that might also be because we share a room, and if both of us lock ourselves in the room, it might get weird..."

Akshay blurted out a laugh. It had been ages since I had seen him laugh.

“Okay, man, I more than like her... I feel I shouldn’t have broken up with her.”

“You broke up with her?” I asked, surprised that someone could let a girl like her go.

“Around two years ago.”

“I thought she must have dumped you... What’s wrong with you? She seemed like a perfectly fine girl?”

“That was the problem... She was too damn perfect. She was so right. We got so close in such less time. I could spend hours talking with her. She stimulated me intellectually. And I was attracted to her. I wanted her and she wanted me.”

“Where’s the problem?” I asked confused.

“I am the problem, Dev. I hadn’t decided whether I wanted to spend all my life with her yet. I am not used to committing. I get the jitters.”

Akshay and I were so different in this regard. I remember, even as a kid, I wanted to spend all my life with Pritha, and here Akshay couldn't settle down even as a 24 year old.

"So... but... But, why are you so depressed seeing her now?"

"Don't ask me questions I can't answer man." He said with a sign of resignation.

I think if you spend too much time on D. Tech, you lose the real motive of dating a girl, which is to finally go out and spend your life with her.

Akshay seemed to have lost on that motive. Somebody had to make him realise that if he missed Sonia so much, he should give this relationship one more chance.

"Give it one more chance, Aks."

"Let it go, Dev."

When men start using each others' pet names, it means they are convincing each other about something. The outcome is that

it usually ends in stalemate. I hoped I would win this one.

On 12th Jan, 20 days after the news of the VW scam first broke out, Inderjit Mehrotra, realising that there was no place for him to go, he came out with a confession notifying the board members and SEBI that the accounts were falsified.

He informed them the profits of VW Electric were Rs.181 crore against Rs. 566 as reflected in the books.

It showed an accrued interest of 98 crores- which was non-existent

He also confessed to having moved the funds from VW to Shanti to fill up his pockets.

However he denied any plans of issuing an IPO for Shanti in the near future.

The CFO of Shanti, however, refuted that and discussed in detail the plan for an IPO in a few months for Shanti, with the SEBI

officials. He pleaded to go soft on him as he wasn't involved in the transfer of funds.

The arrest warrants were issued by the dozen.

Indrajit Mehrotra, Chairman (Shanti Electricals Pvt Ltd.)

Phillipe Kerchenmeyer, Chairman (VW Electric India Ltd.)

Premnath Seth, CFO (Shanti Electricals Pvt. Ltd.)

Ramachandran K, CFO (VW Electric India Ltd.)

Farukh Zaidi, CEO (Marti-Mailler Auditing Co.)

Kansibhai Parekh, Chairman (Kansibhai Accountants)

A few small fishes were caught too. But among them, only one fish is really smelly...

Sourabh Mehrotra, Head Design (VW Electric India Ltd.)

We thought the good thing for Sourabh to do would be to leave the country. But the

over-confident idiot that he is, he stayed back. Just like he had stayed back after vandalising the notice board with a hockey stick when he was in school. Apparently, he hadn't been selected for the school hockey team. He was the captain of the football team. It hurt his ego when he found he didn't even make it to the top 14. His name was not on the list on the notice board, he decided to eliminate the board and the list from its sorry existence, using the very same hockey stick he used to play with. And then he stayed there at the site of destruction. Confident that his father would bail him out. And he did bail him out! We never heard a word against the incident. A new notice board came up in the place of the old one the next day.

Today, however, the case was different. A public company isn't a school, the public aren't the students and SEBI isn't our school's money exploited by the greedy Principal.

He was picked up from his house in up-town Pune, he wore a disheveled look. He was literally dragged from his apartment as the media took pictures of him. All the major channels showed the videos live.

It was over. The ship was sinking. On Jan 15, SEBI dissolved the current Board of members of VW Electric. SEBI initiated an enquiry into the working of Shanti's Board too. Something told me, many smelly fishes are going to be caught from that dirty puddle too. After all, they happen to be Mehrotra's relatives.

On Jan 17, a new Board of Directors were appointed for VW Electric by the Government. The CBI (economic frauds wing) took the case up and reprimanded all accused (including Mehrotra and Sourabh) to judicial custody.

As expected, Shanti's Board of Directors were found guilty of fraud too and were arrested. Huge penalties were imposed on

Shanti. It also had to pay a huge amount to VW Electric for the exploitation of public money.

I was watching all this on PNTV, switching sometimes to NDTV to see if they had a better analysis of this case.

mmm

Chapter 29

... That Ends Well

I was alone watching TV at home, enjoying all the analysis. A blow-by-blow account of how the Titanic was sinking. I wanted to see how an empire built on dishonesty and deceit was crumbling to pieces.

Akshay, Kunal and Umesh wanted to have a drink to celebrate. I let them go without me. I wanted to see this on TV. Now tell me, if in the World Cup final, India makes 450 runs against Australia, you know we are going to win, but wouldn't you wanna watch the entire match? Same here!

My girl, I guess I can call her that now, hadn't called me in 3 days now. Not that she was mad at me or anything, but because girls do that when they get angry. But my girl wanted me to have this moment to myself. She wanted me to enjoy this. Also, knowing her, I think she must be feeling too heady herself, thinking about how a guy can love her so much to win her back like this.

I was expecting a call today. I know the guy usually calls, but come on, let me act a little pricey this week, will ya?

I sat with the cell phone in front of me – Expecting “Pritha” to flash on the screen.

The door bell rang.

I opened the door. It was her. She stood there smiling at me. She wore this flowery-flowery pink dress. It seemed pale as compared to her complexion. She had a bouquet of orchids. She gave them to me.

“Orchids? But they are your favourite, not mine!” I said mischievously.

“Oh... umm... I am sorry.” She answered seriously.

“You should be!” I said mock-seriously.

“I am sorry.” She tried to gauge if I was joking or serious.

“You know what’s my favourite?” I asked.

“What?”

“You!”

Saying this, I pulled her close gently, and kissed her on her forehead.

“My girl just gave me a bouquet of orchids!” I said softly in her ear.

“Well, Mr. Dev, those are not for you, those are for me.” Now it was her turn to be mischievous. “This, Mr. Dev,” she said removing a note from her pocket, “is for you.”

I opened that note. On the note were written the words – “Love will Triumph”.

It was written in my handwriting. It was the same note I had kept in the orchids in the hospital.

I was lost for words. She kept this note.

"I... I.. You...You kept this note with you?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. Tears rolled down her eyes. "I always knew. I always wished. I always believed."

She hugged me. I was a shapeless mass of 160 pounds, held together by a girl who was, a feet shorter and a good 60 pounds lighter. I dropped into her arms.

I felt like crying. But I believe, fathers and boyfriends shouldn't cry. It's just not cool.

I held myself together, looked into her lovely eyes and said –

"Who gets a guy flowers as a gift?"

She blurted out a laugh. A girl looks the most beautiful when she laughs and cries at the same it. I don't know why but, they just look beautiful that way, like, say, rain on a sunny day...

"Okay sir! Maybe next time I, can get you a G.I. Joe or something!" she laughed.

“G.I. Joe? What am I a kid? Get me those small... small hot wheels cars instead. Thank you very much.”

I kissed her. Kept kissing her for hours, months, years... how can one be sure?

The door bell rang. Akshay and Co. must be back from their toasting for our success. Not wanting to let go of Pritha, I held her hand and took her to the door to open it.

And there they were – My Parents!

I let go of Pritha's hand in 0.034 seconds. Pritha looked at my expression and hid herself behind me. But wait! Why were we scared? Because my parents caught us alone in a room? But we weren't doing anything! Actually we were doing something... But that must be okay, right...? I was thinking random things at the same time... Most of those things were questions...

“Ah... so she is the one?” My father asked.

“What one?” My mother asked. I must admit, she was a bit scandalised to see her

well-behaved son alone with a girl in a room. She had seen a lot of boys holding their female classmates' hands in the school where she was the Principal. She was seeing me in the same light, I guess.

But mom, those are horny 16 year old bastards. I am a horny 24 years old... huge difference! Hehehe...

"Well, your son likes her... " Dad said to mom.

"Dad? How come... I mean, you didn't call... I would have come to pick you guys up!" I said sheepishly.

"We wanted to surprise you," my mother said, not oblivious to the irony!

They came here to surprise me, and guess who surprised who?

"Pritha, right?" My dad extended his hand forward to shake her hand.

To my surprise, Pritha touched his feet! Then my mom's feet! All this schooling from the plushiest of private schools hadn't made

her lose touch with her roots. Not that I believe that girls getting married into a family should touch the feet of the elders or anything, but when she did, I felt amazed and proud of my choice. In fact I put my arm around her shoulder. My mother smiled.

There was a thunderstorm in the evening. Akshay, Umesh and Kunal had to return earlier than expected. In Pune, whenever there is a thunderstorm, there is a power cut. I don't really know why it happens. It was getting dark and we had only a couple of candles in the flat. I lit them. As mothers usually do, my mom also entered the kitchen and cooked us a yummy meal in the evening - rajma, alu ki sabzi, daal, boondi raita and pulav, my favourite.

Pritha helped her cook. I always knew she was a good cook, Pritha, I mean. In the 8th grade, we had an excursion. She cooked some 'khicdi' there. Don't tell my mother,

but that was the most awesome khichdi I have ever tasted.

Pritha was helping my mother arrange the dishes. Akshay, Umesh and Kunal were busy opening the casseroles and smelling the dishes. It's not everyday that they get to eat home-cooked food. My mother was busy rolling out hot chapattis, and my dad was busy looking at Pritha.

“Dad? Dad!”

“Huh? Oh!”

I smiled at him. Then glared at him mockingly.

“What? She is pretty, okay!” He said.

“I didn't say anything!”

We kept quiet for some time. Then dad spoke,

“Hey, did you hear about Mehrotra?”

“Umm... yes. I saw it on TV.” I said. I didn't want to let him know that I was in anyway involved it.

“You know what?” dad said, pressing my left hand, “Thank you.”

I heard his voice shiver. I don't know how he knew. But he did. Maybe Akshay told him. Maybe Kunal or Umesh. I don't know.

My dad looked at me. Men know when not to speak. I placed my hand on his. Then got up from there and went to the balcony. Akshay was now done with his savoring the aroma routine.

He came and stood next to me.

“Still no electricity, eh?” He said. A little lame, I would say, considering the fact that we could see the entire city submerged in darkness.

“Yeah...” I said. I am not much of a fan of the obvious.

“So...” he said.

“So...” I said.

“Your parents kinda like her.” Akshay said.

“Yeah, they really do.”

“Hmm... Congrats on getting your girl back.”

“Couldn’t have done it without you.” I said.

“Yeah... that’s so true... haha...”

“Hehe... You are such an ass, Akshay.”

We stood there on the balcony looking at the silent buildings.

“So, what are your plans?” I broke the silence.

“Plans?” He asked.

“Sonia Goel. Be honest. You like her, don’t you?”

“I don’t know.” Akshay said. It was pitch dark, still he couldn’t meet my eyes while saying that.

“Why don’t you do something about it? We can help you.”

“Hmm...”

“Don’t let her go. She loves you too.” I said.

“What? How do you know?” He asked.

“I can... it runs in the family...” I laughed. “Listen man, don’t let her go. You might date all 3 billion women of the world, but I know you are going to come back to her. Don’t let her go.”

Akshay took a deep breath.

“I have applied for a transfer.” Akshay said.

“What? To where?” I asked bewildered.

“To Delhi. Anyway, my work is done here. Besides I miss home. Pune is fun and everything, but I grew up in Delhi and that’s where I would want to settle down.”

“Hmm...” I sighed. Sometimes it’s futile trying to change a friend’s decision. You have to let them do what they want.

“So, when are you going?”

“Next week.”

“That soon?”

“Yeah. I will come to your wedding though.” Akshay said.

“And I wish I could see you getting married too.” I said.

“Let’s see.”

I thought of what to say to him. What would make him change his mind? Should he change his mind? Did he need more time? Should I help him with this? Finally I decided not to.

Akshay needed time. His stint in Delhi would help him clear his mind.

There was quietness for quite some time.

“So do you want like a...” I murmured.

“No.” He replied curtly. “Men don’t hug. Control your feelings man. What did I teach about being khool!”

Saying that, he came ahead and hugged me.

“Nobody has to know about it” He said. “I mean it.”

“I am not too proud to hug you either man.” I said.

“Good. Now let’s go eat some rajma.”

We stuffed ourselves. Then we arranged and rearranged beds to accommodate the guests – my mother, my father and Pritha.

After everyone went to sleep, Pritha and I sneaked to the balcony. It had been 6 hours since the power cut. It was a moonless starry night. It gets chilly in the nights in Pune. I pulled Pritha gently towards me to feel her warm skin against mine.

“Happy?” I asked.

“More than I have ever been, Dev.” She answered.

“You know, I have played and replayed this so many times in my mind.” I said.

She didn’t ask me what I was talking about. She just knew I was talking about that sentence she said. There is this satisfaction which comes with the knowledge that your girl is happy when she is with you.

“You always knew we would end up together?” I asked her.

“I wished we would.” She answered.

I held her hand and bent down on one knee.

I had planned it in my head. I had gone over what to say again and again. But at that moment, the words didn't come to me. I went blank. I had imagined it a little differently. I had thought, I would ask her in front of the world. But here I was popping the question in this lonely night, where we two were the only ones who were awake in the whole city. The concept of World sounds so shallow. There I was, she meant the world to me, and I was her world.

I went down on one knee, her right hand in my hand, her left on her chest. I kissed her hand and said –

“Miss Pritha Bakshi, would you want to spend the rest of your life with me?”

Her eyes went moist. A smile appeared on her lips. She said –

“Yes, I do.”

I stood up and kissed her moist eye-
lashes. I filled my girl in my arms.

The lights came on.

mmm

Arshat Chaudhary



Published by

J-3/16, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002

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Branches

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E-mail: rapidexptn@rediffmail.com

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E-mail: pustakmahalhyd@yahoo.co.in

Printed at : Param Offsetters, Okhla, New
Delhi-110020

© Author

ISBN 978-81-223-1135-8

Edition 2010

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