

THAT FREQUENT VISITOR

‘EVERY FACE HAS A DARKER SIDE...’

BY

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Published by K Hari Kumar, Srishti Publishers & Distributors

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To the Courage of Woman

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‘These wounds don’t seem to heal... this pain is just too real...

There’s just too much that time cannot erase...’

- **My Immortal (Evanescence)**

Facts

- **Sati** refers to a [funeral](#) ritual within some [Asian](#) communities in which a recently [widowed](#) woman [immolates herself](#), typically on the husband's [funeral pyre](#). The practice was outlawed by the [British Raj](#) in 1829 within their own territories in India. It was further banned in 1861 and finally The Indian [Sati Prevention Act](#) from 1988 further criminalised any type of aiding, abetting, and even the glorifying of *sati* practice.

Inspirations

My love for **Calcutta** began with Chiriakhana and Parosh Pathor, two amazing works of the legendary **Satyajit Ray**. As a tribute to the great storyteller and the actor **Tulsi Chakroborty**, I have named one of the main characters after the protagonist in **Parosh Pathor**.

The first chapter has been dedicated to **the Youth of Delhi NCR**, who came together seeking justice for the Brave heart, **Nirbhaya**.

Clearly, one of the greatest actors that India has produced **Ajith Kumar** or **Thala** as we call him has inspired me to physically shape one of the main characters.

Tim Burton is my favorite director. His films with **Johnny Depp** have inspired me since I was a child. The **Dark Humor** and **Gothic** content is a direct result of my craze for his films.

The Stories that have appeared in **Chandamama**, especially **Vikram Vetaal** have fascinated me to the realm of the paranormal. The Legend in this book is a result of reading all those stories back when I was a kid.

One of the greatest poets that England has ever produced, **Richard Baxter**, I draw inspiration from and therefore the name of the protagonist.

Acknowledgements

I started writing this book in September 2013, when I was staying back at home taking care of my mother who had a major surgery. Despite all the pain and complications she had to go through, she never lost her courage and fought her way out. The courage that I saw in her eyes inspired me to write this book. She has been the pillar of strength throughout my journey as an Author and I can never thank her enough.

My Father would never bring me toys from his abroad trips when I was a child. He would bring me pens. I could never boast about it back then, but now I realize how far-sighted he had been. Thank you Abba!

I must thank Dr. Patro, Mrs. Anju Joshi and the entire DAV family for their support. Special mention to author, Mr. Krishnamurthy, who introduced me to the works of Albert Camus when I was still running around with the unpublished manuscript of When Strangers Meet..

I thank all my Bangla friends and fans on facebook for helping me with the language, all fans of Thala Ajith and Mohanlal who were warmly welcomed my tribute to the superstars.

Last but perhaps the most, I thank my publisher.

Prologue

Vypeen Island, 1947

It was afternoon and the sun did not show any mercy on the tanned Englishman. After walking on the beach for a little longer than twenty minutes, Richard found a small tea-stall in the corner of the yard. There was one customer, whose face cried with hunger, and then the owner of the tea-stall, a veteran of native origin. Upon seeing the stout young white man approaching him, the veteran welcomed him with the widest grin ever seen on the shores of Vypeen Island. He muttered something in the native language. He could not understand what they meant for he had no knowledge of their language; Malayalam. Some words were vaguely similar to the Dravidian language of Tamil. He had spent some time in the Madras Presidency a couple of years back. He spoke Tamil quite well for an Englishman from Calcutta.

‘*Chaaya edukette?*’ The veteran asked him in Malayalam.

‘Yes, please.’ The word was the same in Tamil and Hindi, *Chaaya* meant tea, and he could surely make use of the tea to strike a conversation with the native. Wasn’t that culture in England and the custom in India, just that white men liked it black and brown men liked it with milk.

‘*Saar Englandil ninnaano?*’ The native asked with the same wide smile.

Richard looked around; the other customer was eagerly waiting for Richard’s reply as well. He smiled at him, exposing his bright white teeth. Richard forced a smile.

‘I... I do not understand. *Yenna sollarathu?*’ Richard tried asking in uncanny Tamil, hoping that the native would be able to understand.

‘You...’ He said pointing at Richard’s chest, ‘England?’

‘Oh yes. I am.’ Richard replied instantly.

‘You kill India? We *Simon go back* you.’ The tea-seller chuckled. Beneath the chuckles lay an innocent warning of what they would do in case the white man showed his true color again. The mutiny and freedom struggle were still fresh in their minds. Although it had happened way up in the north, even the natives of the southernmost tip were well aware of the slogan.

‘No...no... I want to buy that house, up there on the cliff.’ Richard declared pointing his walking cane towards the picturesque frame.

Suddenly, an expression of pity and uncapped fear grew on the tea-seller’s face.

‘*Athu pretha kottaaramaanu... Venda Saaiyippe.* Buy... no...no!’ He said.

‘Yes... yes... I want to buy it.’ The Englishman spoke without recognizing any word other than ‘buy’.

‘*Pretham... Bhootham* in house!’ He tried to make the white man understand.

‘Yes, the house. Who is the owner?’

‘*Ownera?*’

‘Yes... yes... the owner, where can I find him?’ Richard was delighted to see recognition in the native’s tone.

‘Owner dead. He no come.’ The tea-seller slackened the porous cotton cloth that was adorning his hip, ‘You *talkku Saami, Broker Saami.*’ The sun shone its brightest ray on his balding head.

‘Sammy?’ The Englishman reconfirmed.

‘*Saami. Go Tripunithara, Saami thanthri* in big Vishnu temple.’ The native spoke each word distinctly as if he were teaching a three year old the first words of her life.

‘You mean, *Saami* is a priest in the big Vishnu temple in *Tri... Tripunithara?*’

‘Yes!’ The tea-seller smiled, but it was short lived as an expression of grim terror replaced the smile again. He moved towards the Englishman who was placing the hat on his head, preparing to leave, and warned ‘*Avide Bhootangalude nivaasam undu.* The house is haunted by a visitor... *That Frequent Visitor...*’

Part 1

The New Arrivals

Chapter 1

Raj Path, New Delhi

23rd December 2012, 18:30 hours

‘As you can see behind me over ten thousand youngsters have assembled here at the India Gate despite of the chilling cold to claim justice for the Delhi *braveheart*. This is modern India’s biggest gathering of youngsters till date in protest against the system that is incapable of safeguarding the veil of an Indian woman.’ The TV news reporter announced on her microphone looking at the camera in front of her.

She continued, ‘We have students from nearby cities of Gurgaon, Noida, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and even from far away cities like Rohtak, Ambala and Mathura.’ She turned around and started moving towards a cluster of youngsters adorned in black jackets. The cameraman followed her with the camera, ‘We have this particular group that is sporting black jackets over black shirts and jeans like a uniform. Let’s ask them some questions.’

The youngsters were excited at the arrival of the television camera and the gorgeous reporter. The group consisting of a dozen boys and ten girls diverted their total attention towards the reporter for a moment.

‘Please tell us where you are from?’ The reporter asked.

‘We are from Piramal College of Arts, Ghaziabad,’ One of the students replied.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘We have been here since Friday. We plan to protest continuously until *Nirbhaya* gets justice!’ claimed one of the girls who seemed to be in-charge of the group.

‘Why are you all sporting these black outfits? Is this some kind of a uniform? Does this symbolize your cause or is it simply because it is too cold and black keeps the body warm?’ The reporter asked the obvious eyeing the jacket worn by the girl.

‘Black is the symbol of darkness, shame, grief and we are in a moment of darkness. Therefore, we are wearing black and we request all our friends who are watching this to wear black to support this protest. Use a black image as your profile picture on all social media sites.’

‘This is the statement of youth...’ before she could complete her statement, the reporter felt a buzz in her sweater’s pocket and she recognized the pattern.

A high priority call!

She excused herself from the group and moved inside the news van parked few hundred meters from where she was reporting. She closed the van's door and answered, 'Yes Sir?'

'Are you at the location?' a voice spoke rudely.

'Yes Sir, I am here. Any updates on...'

She was quickly interrupted by the rude voice.

'MC will arrive there in exactly nine minutes; he just left from the High Commission of Malta, so will be entering the protest zone from Man Singh Road. I have not tipped any other news channel, but he is on foot. Make sure you interject him at the new U-turn before anyone else does.'

'Obviously!'

'Don't forget my reward. I would like it wrapped in silver at my Gurgaon apartment.' The voice reminded her.

The reporter easily detected the greed in the man's voice.

'Good luck, Ms. Pakhi Dutta!' the voice said and hung up.

Pakhi Dutta, one of the most popular journalists among the youth of the country worked for MANORMA 24X7. She knew very well how to get things done and whom to use and when. She proudly got out of the van, stuffing the iPhone into her pocket. She called out her camera operator and quickly started moving towards the new U-turn on Man Singh Road as tipped by the informer. She was a rage among the women for her strong feminist stance while men simply went gaga over her gorgeous looks. A wink of her eye was practically enough to paralyze any man in the country. An icon representing an independent modern woman, she was nothing short of a supermodel who had chosen the burning path of a journalist over an easily available life of glamour. That was Pakhi Dutta concisely. She always welcomed challenges, which she faced and overcame, backed by the constant motivation from her brother, Parosh Chandra Dutta, who was a popular author.

'We don't have much time, hardly eight minutes. Keep the camera ready. We will shoot him at sight, understood?' She commanded the veteran camera operator Gobind.

'Of course, I have everything ready.' Gobind assured Pakhi.

Pakhi smiled and panted towards the spot.

Five minutes later, Pakhi spotted the minister in a traditional kurta marching towards Raj Path. She was surprised to see the color of the kurta. It was black, unconventional for a

minister, touted to be the next Prime Minister of the world's greatest democracy. Incidentally, his bodyguards were not around him either. It was just him and his P.A. What was he planning to do? She wondered if his competitors, Gandhi and Modi, would display such bashful carelessness?

The P.A. saw the approaching reporter and camera operator. She was famous enough to be recognized by any kid in the block.. He stopped the minister and alerted him of the incoming *pest*.

The minister looked at Pakhi and smiled. That was another unusual action; normally ministers would frown or totally ignore the presence of Pakhi who was also famous for being a Hitler towards all *men* of politics. The smile broadened with a welcome gesture of the arm.

'Hello Ms. Dutta, what a pleasant surprise.' The minister greeted the reporter.

'Well, I am even more surprised.' She said as she pressed her palms together in salutation.

'Well, all the fishermen are in the sea waiting with their bait and here you are away from the sea to catch the big fish, eh?' He phrased his point with a heavy tint of sarcasm.

'I was just taking my chance. How have you been, Mr. Jagannatha?'

'Disappointed... enraged... just like my nation!' came the diplomatic answer from the minister.

'Would you mind if I turn on the... camera...?'

'That's your purpose and my medium to my people... Privileged I shall be if you turn it on...' He said humbly and pushed the strand of white hair that hung over his left eyebrow revealing what was the aftermath of an acid burn. He claimed to have incurred it in the freedom struggle.

She looked at Gobind who was already ready with the camera placed firmly on his right shoulder and eye in the finder. She turned back to the minister, 'Just a few questions.'

'Do you mind walking the talk?' He requested.

'Not at all.'

He gestured the way with his right hand like a perfect gentleman. They started walking towards Raj Path.

'So you were asking?'

'First of all, I am amused. Why black?'

'You know very well why I am wearing a black kurta, don't you?' he shot back sportingly.

‘It is difficult to believe, since a minister of your repute is typecast to follow conventions.’

‘I reject conventions if they limit the progress of humanity.’ He replied strongly.

‘And how does wearing black work towards the *progress of humanity*?’ She tried to counter.

‘How does the setting of the sun work towards a new day?’ the minister shot back once again.

‘It’s pointless! How can you relate the two?’

‘It might be pointless to you but if the young people of my country have joined hands to fight injustice while my fellow ministers and the honorable President is silently witnessing the proceedings on their television sets, then it’s my duty to join those youngsters as one among them to pitch my voice against the powerless people in power.’

‘Or... Is it just a way to shine in front of the youth? A major attempt to attract potential voters?’ Pakhi asked in an aggressive tone.

‘The sun shines its light just to keep the earth alive. It is necessary... the light.’ He replied.

‘Very well, last week you announced that you will dismiss all claims of corruption against Minister George Mathukutty. Is it because he hails from your home state Kerala, and holds the key in forming a coalition from the state in the future?’

‘Right now, if I accuse you of planting a bomb, and ask my dear friend here to validate his statement as an eyewitness in the court of law, the court will prosecute you. However, does that mean you are guilty?’

‘But the proof was very authentic – a CCTV recording, IP retrieval and a bluetooth tracker as evidence is not a bunko witness,’ she objected.

‘I have worked with him for a long time and I trust him. If he is guilty he will be punished, but I am sure he has been framed by the opposition in his state.’

Pakhi knew she could never win over this man of iron, not in a million light years. She could hear the chanting of the crowd getting louder with every step they took towards India Gate.

The minister continued ‘Do you see that?’ he said pointing towards the gathering. ‘That is the future of our nation. Unfortunately, my counterparts chose to stay quiet because of which this vast ocean of energy will be misled into a dark alley of anarchy, just as it has happened in the Arab lands. Some are quiet because of purpose and others because of non-authority. I am bound by neither and so I must join them to assure them that their voices won’t go unheard.’

The four had already entered the scene of protest and suddenly all eyes were on the man in the black kurta and the gorgeous woman with the microphone. It did not take more than a second for a mob of eager and angered youth to surround their favorite minister – the one whom they trusted with their future. There were salutes from all *eight* corners, and unanimous chants of praise followed.

‘I have not come here as a minister with police protection and bodyguards but as an ordinary *angered* citizen of my country. I am the public and I am here as the public to raise voice for justice for the one who was a part of us... the public.’ He stated strongly and his words were hailed to the heavens by the protestors, ‘and the Public wants justice!’ He shouted and instantly it coupled multiple times by a thousand chants of -*Yes we want justice!*

Pakhi knew there was no way she could throw another question at the inaccessible minister. Inaccessible made by the stream of youngsters who had gathered around chanting slogans in favor of his name and power. She started turning around but a question from behind stopped her, ‘I hope your brother watches this interview closely. He should not leave out anything while penning down my biography.’ The minister smiled and slipped back into the crowd.

Pakhi smiled at the statement and shook her head.

‘Is this man a revolutionary or a hypocrite?’ Gobind asked looking at the proceedings.

‘Well, he’s a revolutionary minister; he is MC Jagannatha Varma, the future Prime Minister of our country.’

She switched off the microphone and started moving towards the van. It was time to leave as she had another important appointment.

Chapter 2

Huda City Center Metro Station, Gurgaon***21:40 hours***

Pakhi got off at the metro station That was unusually deserted for that hour.> She had been hearing about the sighting of a South Indian's ghost in stations on the yellow line ever since the accident on the metro line occurred two years ago. A 30 something year old man from Chennai had been killed. Pakhi hated freaky stories, especially when it had to do with South Indians. Her last boyfriend was from Cochin and when one man pissed her off, she ended up cursing the entire region. For the time being she hated South Indians and the only South Indian she could respect was the minister she had interviewed earlier at India Gate.

It was chilly, and the fog was heavy. Visibility was limited to a few meters and the cold wind blew into the terminal metro station. The wind passed through her delicate body that was not well adorned with woollens. She shivered as she suddenly felt as if someone was calling her from behind. She shuddered as she had been the last one to get off the train. She did not want to turn around as all the incidents from the newspaper report of 2011 came back to her mind. She could not forget any of that for she had done a huge feature on the accident to slam the DMRC and hold them responsible for the mishap. Her rise to fame! All but an accident that killed one unfortunate man called *Iyer, Krishnaprasad Iyer* from Chennai. The story became so sensational that *K. Hari Kumar*, a Gurgaon based writer, actually weaved a whole novel around it. The book was titled, *When Strangers Meet*, she recalled.

She thought she heard a voice behind her again. Her heart thumped louder, her breathing got heavier until she was absolute that she had distinctly heard a voice. She stopped, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and turned around. Upon opening her eyes she saw a figure, of a man. He was bulky, tanned, and was wearing a white dhoti and shirt. All the ghosts from those horror stories she had read as a child started laughing in chorus, or so she thought.

Was this the ghost that haunted the metro station?

Was this the ghost of the man who had died in the accident, the man who was run over by a speeding metro? The man she did a story on? Her rise to fame.

Was this the ghost of Krishnaprasad Iyer?

'Yenamma? You left your phone *in the trainu*. I brought it for you.' The man spoke.

'What?' She tried to ask, but her voice did not let itself out of her pharynx and she squeaked like a mouse.

'Your mobile phone,' the man put his right hand forth.

She saw a gigantic S3 in his thick hand. She immediately recognized it as hers and gingerly took it from the mysterious South Indian *ghost*. Her hands were shivering out of fear.

‘*Yennamma*, why are you wearing no *clothesu*? *Yit* is very very *coldu*. Wear sweater or you will catch a *coldu*.’ He laughed out as if he had cracked some big joke.

Pakhi kept staring at him blankly. She regretted having done the research on the accident and on the man who died. Was she crazy or was she looking at a ghost? With a lot of effort she asked him ‘Wh... who... Who are you?’

‘*My name is Iyer...*’

Iyer! She thought. She knew she was certainly looking at the ghost!

‘...*Ramaprasad Iyer*,’ he completed.

Ramaprasad? She sighed in relief.

‘From Chennai?’ She asked, just to clarify whether he was the dead man’s ghost. ‘No no no... From Kochi, Kerala.’ He replied.

There was silence all around and then all of a sudden her phone rang. It was her brother.

‘Hello Parosh? Yes... yes... I am here.’ She spoke even before Parosh could accuse her of being late. She looked down at her feet as she spoke.

‘You know she’s waiting for you. She does not eat, she does not sleep. I am sorry that she loves you so much. If you do not love her back, at least stop by occasionally to say you care. You are such a great actress on screen, why don’t you use some of your skills here, lady?’ came in the voice of her brother from the other end.

‘I am coming, okay? I had lost my phone, and have just got it back. Thanks to...’ She looked up assuming to find the face of the man who had found her phone. To her shock, there was no one there. Her senses betrayed her once again.

‘I...I... I have to go. Bye, tell her I love her a lot and I am on my way.’ She disconnected the call and slipped the phone into her mac case.

She looked around; there was no one there, not a single soul. The silence and the freezing chill of terror crept back in. She suddenly felt afraid, which was an unusual occurrence. In the distance, she could hear the next train arriving. She felt safe but she knew she could not hang in there for long. She started descending the escalators quickly and felt relieved upon finding a small crowd on the ground floor. She rushed outside to her car that was parked in the parking lot. She had to hurry, for someone was waiting for her.

Someone who loved her a lot.

That Frequent Visitor

www.facebook.com/KathaHariK

Someone special.

Chapter 3

South City-2, Gurgaon

22:15 hours

The door-bell rang like a roaring siren and the middle aged author rushed to answer the door. He switched off the television first. Parosh had been waiting all evening for his sister to arrive but as always, he had to couple some sixty extra minutes to the clock of his expectations. He pulled down the bolt on the top right corner of the white colored door, and it opened to reveal a face. The gorgeous face of his dearest sister.

‘Piku, do you know that it is 10:15?’ Parosh threw a question that would soon lead to a series of grievances.

‘Duh, I got a watch too!’ Pakhi said showing him her wrist watch.

‘I cannot believe you would do this to her. And don’t give me your *fuck-off I hate all men* attitude, I am your brother. You don’t have to love me, but do give back some love for the girl who loves you more than anyone, especially when she’s going through a difficult phase.’

‘Yeah, I heard that one on the phone. I can do that if you let me in, so will you?’ She asked the obvious.

‘Of course, I do not have any choice, do I?’ Parosh turned around and moved back to the living room. ‘Lock that door. You will be staying here tonight. Okay?’

Pakhi closed the door behind her. She hated it when her brother treated her like a kid ‘Look, I am not your eight year old!’ She argued.

‘She’s nine.’ Parosh corrected.

‘Oh yes, right. Where is she?’

‘In her bedroom. She has not slept and has been waiting for her beloved aunt to make it in time on the most important day of her calendar. Little does she realize that she does not matter to you at all. All you care about is yourself and your ideals. I know you hate men, fine! But she is not one, then why do this to her?’ Parosh kept complaining as he picked up the LED television’s remote control from the dining table. He pressed the power button. The television turned on and a live coverage of the protest at India Gate showed up on the screen.

‘Oh well, I was there you know. They are all there for a girl who is fighting for her life, mistreated by a bunch of wankers. And well what do you know, you still watch that junkyHeadlines Now while your own sister is the starlet of MANORMA 24X7.’ Pakhi retorted.

. Headlines Now was MANORMA 24X7’s biggest rival when it came to channel ratings. Although both sold the same crap, it was just that HT sold news on the prime time slot through their star reporter Arunab Sardesai and his rugged looks while MANORMA 24X7 based itself solely on the gorgeous aura of Pakhi.

‘She’s waiting for you, Piku. Would you *please* go to her now?’ Parosh requested with clasped hands.

Pakhi pulled down the mac case’s strap and placed the bag on the dining table. She started towards the bedroom.

She had to console a sentimental heart.

Chapter 4

Shiuli Dutta was standing at the window with her elbows neatly rested on the wooden sill. Crossed were her arms and a cozy teddy bear pillowed itself between the warmth of her arms and bosom. She looked at the shining moon, wishing to find the footmarks of the one who left. Her bodily features were a blend-off of what would be priceless beauty in the coming years, soft and sharp. Raw beauty was in her genes.

The door to her room opened and Pakhi entered the moderately decorated room calling out the girl's name 'Shiuli, *āmār* princess *kothay??*' She pretended as if she had not seen the little girl at the window. Pakhi walked past the bed and kneeled down next to the girl. 'So there you are. Many happy returns of the day, Shiuli.'

'You are late and I do not talk to late-comers.' Shiuli replied without looking at her aunt.

'So, my princess is angry because I am late, but *Pishi* was working and I lost my mobile phone in the metro. I took a while to find it.'

She pulled out her phone and waved it sideward, 'I got it though.'

She smiled hoping the girl would see the five-year old Shiuli as the wallpaper on the phone and cheer up.

The young girl completely ignored her aunt. Pakhi knew what would make this nine year old angel turn her face towards the 'little too-late' aunt of hers. She placed the phone on the windowsill, slipped her slender fingers into the pocket of her jeans, produced a pearl bracelet, and held it in front of the little girl, 'Look what I have got for you, Shiuli.'

The girl did not turn around as her aunt had expected. She held her teddy bear firmly and spoke in an adjuring tone 'You can never bring what I really want. Nobody can!'

Pakhi sighed at the girl's unbendable wish, but there was nothing she could do about it.

'*Tūmi kī āmār mā ke enecho?*' The girl asked and turned towards her aunt. Her eyes filled with tears.

'Shiuli... *Aami jaani...*'

Shiuli interrupted Pakhi 'I know you can't bring her back. Nobody can. You do not have to explain. I am not upset at you, Pishi, I am just missing my mother. And no gift can be as valuable as her.'

Pakhi knew what it was like being a nine year old – confused, frustrated with the changes in her body and mind. And she had hit the bottom on that fateful day of 12th January, 2012 when life struck her hard with a terrible blow. Pakhi noticed blankness in Shiuli's eyes that were getting filled up by tears. She pulled Shiuli towards her bosom and embraced her tightly. 'Your mother had to go because she was too dear to God.'

‘But Mom said Jesus never hurts good girls, then why did he hurt me by taking her away? Why is He so selfish?’ She complained innocently.

Pakhi might have been one of the best journalists of her time but she went speechless every time her niece spoke of her mother. She tried hard to console her,

‘Well, Jesus has his own plans,’ she remarked with the stance of an atheist. However, she could not reveal that to a believer who was brought up under the cape of Jesus. She tried to justify, ‘he always has plans.’

‘God’s plans. Yes, Mom always said that. Jesus has plans. He might be late, but He is always there when you really need Him.’ Shiuli chanted.

‘Yes dear. He is always there when you need him.’ Pakhi tried to fake some compassion.

‘Why don’t you believe in Jesus, *pishi*?’ She asked.

‘Err... of course I do, angel.’ Pakhi lied to the girl, suppressing her own principles about God. Pakhi had been an atheist ever since she could remember.

The grieving girl hugged her aunt, or *pishi* as they said in Bangla, and she felt a few teardrops on her shoulder. The teddy bear fell out of her grip and landed on the floor. Shiuli picked it up with huge amount of anxiety on her angelic face.

‘Mr. Clifford!’

She gently pressed the teddy bear’s tummy, felt the velvety sponge and spoke into the bear’s ears, ‘I am sho sholeee, are you hurt? I promise I won’t be careless again.’

Pakhi looked at her niece. She grinned and reassured her, ‘Mr. Clifford is perfectly fine dear. After all you love him so much. Look he is smiling.’

‘He is always smiling.’

‘So should you dear.’

‘Mom always said Mr. Clifford will take care of me, and that he will never let me cry.’

‘Oh, is that why he is always smiling?’

‘Yes! Jesus had asked mom her last wish and she asked Him to bless Mr. Clifford so that he takes care of me.’ Shiuli explained without the slightest of suspicions.

‘I hope he does.’

‘Can I give this bracelet to Mr. Clifford? It’s his birthday too and he never gets gifts.’ After all, Mr. Clifford came into Shiuli’s life on her last birthday as a gift from her mother. Her mother had passed away few days after that.

‘Of course, sweetheart.’ Pakhi smiled looking at her niece neatly tying the expensive bracelet around the teddy bear’s yarned neck. If that gave joy to her innocent heart, then it was truly priceless.

‘How does he look?’ Shiuli asked displaying the teddy bear upfront.

‘Oh! He looks very *beautiful*.’

‘Now all he needs are a pair of glasses and a walking stick.’

‘Walking stick? Why?’ Pakhi asked curiously.

‘Duh... he just fell down and he must have hurt his knee. He needs support.’

Pakhi chuckled at her niece's prescription. 'Of course he does!' She had been starving since morning and so had her niece.

She asked 'So, I heard you did not have anything for dinner, is it true?'

'How could I eat on my birthday without my *mishi kishi Pishi*.' Shiuli exclaimed in the cutest burst of laughter as she rubbed her nose on her aunt's. Both of them had the same long pointed nose!

'So, I am here now. Let's feast on everything and leave nothing for grumpy daddy.' Pakhi expressed her sarcastic humor and she lifted the girl off the floor and carried her out of the room by the hand.

The little girl burst into laughter and the country's most feared journalist turned into the most loved aunt. Ever since Shiuli's mother died, her entire world was built around her aunt, and Pakhi loved her niece unconditionally.

Shiuli was the most important person in Pakhi's life.

Chapter 5

Pakhi and Parosh gathered around the dinner table and sang *Happy Birthday* in an uncoordinated tone while Shiuli joyously cut the small cake that Parosh had baked earlier in the evening. He loved to cook occasionally and the icing on the vanilla cake was chocolaty enough for anyone to overlook the burnt bottom. He hoped they would not notice the creativity of his absent mindedness. This ceremony was followed by a peaceful family dinner.

The dinner was followed by a late-night movie. Shiuli and Pakhi watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* once again. It was her favorite.

After the movie, Pakhi accompanied Shiuli to her room. She looked at the young girl who was looking out of the window once again, as she lay on her bed.

‘What happened, *Mishti*?’ Pakhi asked her with motherly affection.

‘Pishi, where do dead people go?’ Out came an illogical question from the girl’s curious mind.

‘Hmmm... I guess they all go to heaven.’

‘Dad says they become stars and shine on nights like this.’

‘I hope they do not become ugly creatures like *Davy Jones*.’ Pakhi said refering to the movie they had watched earlier.

‘Do you believe in life after death?’ Shiuli asked.

‘I am not sure, dear.’

‘They have to go somewhere. I once read in a book that those unfortunate souls who could not complete the purpose of their life become ghosts to finish their unfinished business,’ PakhiShiuli said.

‘I am sure that you read it in one of those novels by K Hari Kumar!’ Pakhi said thinking about the ghost of Krishnaprasad Iyer who visited the young boy from Gurgaon to save his dying father.

‘Why are people afraid of ghosts?’

‘Well, it is human nature to be scared of an unknown thing. For example, your dad was too scared to go to the potty alone when he was a kid. He was afraid that the potty would eat him,’ she noticed a mild smile weaving itself across the girl’s face,

‘Until my dad, that is, your grandfather locked him up inside the toilet one day. He screamed and he cried and he sulked until he wet his pants.’

Shiuli started chuckling and Pakhi continued, ‘but after spending an hour in the toilet he realized that the potty was harmless. Since then he has never been afraid.’

‘Guess, that is why he is in there all the time.’ The girl remarked chuckling aloud.

‘Well that is because your Dad has an appetite for exotic spices,’ Pakhi said giggling along with her niece.

‘So, people are afraid of ghosts because they do not know them. Is that right?’ Shiuli asked.

‘I believe so.’ Pakhi affirmed.

‘Do you think that my mother is a ghost too?’ She asked with a frown. The girl expected a favorable answer.

Pakhi did not know how to answer that. She could never imagine her sister-in-law in the form of a ghost clad in a white gown with blue skin like the one in *Tim Burton’s Corpse Bride*. She was afraid to answer because she did not know what would help the girl sleep: a haunting ‘yes’ or a daunting ‘no’. She decided to change the subject.

‘Do you want to know the story behind your name?’

‘Yes, of course.’ the girl responded inquisitively.

‘I will tell you if you promise to sleep after this. No more questions hereafter.’ Pakhi found a quick bargain.

‘I promise!’ the girl gave her word.

‘Although she had never seen her grandfather, your mother had grown up listening to his heroics from her mother and learnt about how he wanted to name their children after flowery incense sticks. He had chosen two names, Komol if it was a boy or...’ Pakhi locked her eyes with the girl’s Brown eyes and chanted in the most endearing tone, ‘*Shiuli*.’

‘Shiuli... wow! I never knew that Shiuli could have been my mother’s name.’

‘When you were born, your dadu consulted an astrologer and he forbade him from christening you with a name that began with the Bangla letter *sh*. He said it would make you unlucky and attract ill-fated forces of nature. So we decided to name you Bela, which is the Bangla word for...’

‘But you ended up naming me Shiuli?’ the girl asked interrupting her aunt.

‘Yes. Your dad is a guy with a modern outlook, who at that time was an ardent activist for liberal thoughts and made the final call against the wishes of his own father.’

‘I love my daddy!’ Shiuli exclaimed.

‘Of course he is adorable, Shiuli.’ Pakhi said and smiled at her niece.

‘I am going to tell this to Mary and Taniya right away.’ She picked up her iPhone and started texting her besties.

Pakhi took away the iPhone and said, ‘I kept my promise and now you must keep yours too. Time to sleep dear. You can message them tomorrow.’ Pakhi got up and kissed Shiuli on her forehead.

‘Please tell Daddy that I love him.’ She said softly.

‘I will. Goodnight, Shiuli.’ She said looking at her niece who had just entered the ninth winter of her life, yet her heart was that of a six year old. Sometimes she worried about Shiuli’s immaturity. Girls her age did not carry a teddy bear everywhere. One day, she’ll bloom into a woman, and a woman had to be bold and wise, not timid and childish. She will eventually learn.

‘Goodnight, Pishi.’

The girl curled herself in her bed and Pakhi closed the door after switching off the lights. It was time to sleep.

Chapter 6

Parosh looked at the dwindling late night traffic on Sohna Road from his apartment's verandah.

'So, you are doing that again?' Pakhi startled him. 'You will not change, right?' She said pointing at the burning cigarette in his right hand.

He ignored his sister.

'Just give it to me.' She snatched the slow killer and placed it in her mouth.

'What are you doing?' Parosh asked with irritation.

'Why? Smoking is not reserved for dogs, is it?' Pakhi was back to being her feminist self again. She coughed upon inhaling the smoke.

Parosh pulled out the cigarette from her mouth and threw it down from the railing. 'You should do what you are supposed to do, dog or no dog. You have a life ahead. Do not waste it.'

'And what about you, Mr. Writer? Don't you have a life too?'

'My life...' he sighed and continued, '...she left me last year.'

'She left you her life, have you forgotten that? Your daughter, with great difficulty, is pulling herself out from the agony of losing her mother but all her daddy dear thinks about is ending his life with cigarettes and alcohol. Don't you love your daughter?'

'I do. But at least she has got you, unlike me. Besides, nobody is going to marry a tramp like you. So, the two of you will be together in each other's company till she finds her Prince Charming.' He tried to tease his sister despite all the pain in his heart.

'Ha ha... I hate you, *dada*.' She noticed his eyes getting wet at the memories of his deceased wife. She started walking towards him. She hugged him and tried to soothe his grief.

'You write such inspiring stories, you have motivated an entire generation of hopeless idiots and here you are demotivated and depressed yourself!'

'I miss her, Piku.' The tall man burst into tears and tightly held his sister.

'I know and I miss her too.'

'I have not been myself ever since she left, but I have to act like this strong stone-hearted daddy for Shiuli, hiding my tears and pain away so that she does not fall into the same pit of depression that I have fallen into. I want to cry like a baby. I love her, Piku.' He confessed like a little boy.

'Okay, You *are* crying like a baby.' She said patting his back.

Parosh detached himself and wiped away the tears that had finally found their way out. 'I am sorry... I... I...'

'It is okay.' She smiled, 'and by the way, I talked to the minister's PA earlier in the evening about your suggestion.'

Parosh rubbed off his tears and struggled back into the shoes of an author.

'Yes, what did he say?' He asked.

‘He liked your suggestion. He has approved it and the arrangements for accommodation will be done the moment you wish to go.’ She conveyed.

‘Was it so easy to convince him?’

‘Apparently, you are a bestselling fiction author who is penning down his first biography and that too about the man who will be the next Prime Minister of our great nation. How can he refuse if you wanted to spend some time in the city where the man spent his growing up years? I told him it’s all part of your research.’

She paused for a moment to note the acceptance in her brother’s eyes.

‘He loved the idea and he has offered you a deal of your dreams.’

‘What is that?’

‘Well, MC Jagannatha Varma owns a traditional Malayalee palace right in the middle of the royal town of Tripunithara. A palace that dates back to the time of Vasco Da Gama.’ She revealed with glowing eyes.

Parosh’s face lit up with a fresh zeal of enthusiasm ‘You must be kidding my damned senses!’

‘Dear brother, you will get an in-depth dig into the man’s early life and political rise. Hell, you might even crack the code behind that pocketwatch that he carries with himself everywhere.’

Pakhi gave him a clearer picture ‘You have to let me know whenever you want to go so that I can inform him to make all necessary arrangements.’

‘Why should I delay this opportunity? I am packing right away,’ He jumped up like a kid, ‘Even Shiuli’s school is closed for the winter break. Perfect timing.’

‘Yeah! It would be a welcome change.’

She breathed in deep before making the revelation, ‘By the way your daughter is a reading a lot of K Hari Kumar lately! ’

For a moment Parosh was dragged back into the lanes of professional jealousy.

‘How... I mean why?’ He asked.

‘I know it makes you jealous that your daughter reads the stories of your rival. She has no taste for your cheesy love stories.’

‘So be it.’ He smiled and accepted the reason, ‘So what about our trip?’

‘I think you can start packing, I will inform him in the morning itself.’

‘Kerala- I am coming!’ Parosh exclaimed with joy and went inside while his sister chose to stay back in the verandah, resting her back on the railing. She watched her brother behave like an overjoyed little boy once again. She loved him too, just as he loved her, but they were too grown up to accept that. She no more blamed Shiuli for her childishness. She wondered if she was the only grown-up in that family, but then, *family was family...*

Chapter 7

Two days later

Cochin International Airport, Nedumbassery

Shiuli held Mr. Clifford tightly as she waited near the conveyor belt with her dad for their luggage. It was always boring to wait. Her father was a writer and patience was his closest buddy while her aunt was a journalist and she hated to be kept waiting. Shiuli was like her aunt. She moved closer to Pakhi and rested her head on her hip. Pakhi looked down at her niece; she sensed the sheepish boredom of a child who was being forced to wait.

‘I know you are bored. So am I. Wait till we get out of here, I am going to take you around this beautiful city while daddy dear can stay back in the big old palace and prepare notes on his subject.’ Pakhi tried to cheer up the girl.

‘Will the old palace have ghosts?’ Shiuli asked.

‘I do not think so, dear. There is not enough place for people in Kerala, I wonder if ghosts can be accommodated. This place is heavily populated, dear.’

‘If there is one, I hope it is like Casper.’ Shiuli wished.

‘I hope there are none.’ Pakhi prayed.

‘You are afraid of ghosts, aren’t you?’

‘Well, I really do not wish to wake up at midnight to sounds of screechy laughter and howling wolves.’ Pakhi clarified.

‘Well, I think you are afraid of the unknown. If I meet a ghost, I will try to know it.’

‘I do not know if you should be afraid of ghosts, but you should be surely afraid of mosquitoes in Kochi!’ Pakhi burst into a mild chuckle, ‘I heard there are plenty of mosquitoes in this city. So beware of those little suckers.’

‘You are so funny, Pishi!’

Amidst the laughter, Pakhi noticed her brother struggling with the two huge suitcases that they had packed for their fortnight long stay in the City of Spices.

‘I think daddy needs help, wanna help?’

‘Of course, Pishi!’

The aunt and niece made a commendable pair and together they filled the void in the author’s life left by the passing away of his wife. Their lives had changed forever on that fateful day in 2012. Little did they know that their lives were going to change once again... for better... or for worse, only time would tell.

Chapter 8

Tripunithara, Kochi

The Duttas were received by the caretaker of Varma palace from the airport and as arranged by the prime ministerial candidate, they were taken to his ancestral palace in the town of Tripunithara in a taxi. Shiuli was amused by the beauty of God's own Country. Never had she seen so much greenery in her life as she had been born and brought up in the dusty cosmopolitan city of Gurgaon.

'Pishi, there are so many coconut trees here that I can start my own oil company.' Shiuli exclaimed. The last time she had seen so many coconut trees had been in the *Pirates of Caribbean* that they had watched on her birthday. She was a huge fan of Jack Sparrow... Err... *Captain Jack Sparrow*.

'Yes, dear and that is why Kerala is called the Land of Coconuts.' Pakhi explained as she pulled down the luggage from the taxi's dickey.

'Dear, they are not trees, they are called palms.' corrected her writer father who could not stand improper lexicography. He went on to add, 'Coconut palms, date palms...'

'Do you see this?' Pakhi interrupted showing her left hand's palm to the writer and said, 'You can talk to this 'palm' of mine.'

'I am just correcting my nine year old.' He tried to justify in a hushed tone.

'She will learn that in school, okay? Don't spoil this trip.' She whispered in reply.

'Yeah, that's what they do at school.'

Pakhi gave him a stringent look of a pissed soul.

'Fine! I will not correct my daughter. I am leaving her in your custody.' he surrendered.

'Good. I will take care of Shiuli while you do your research on the subject, Mr. Varma. Deal?'

'Deal. Just do not be careless.'

'I am not your nineyear old daughter, so stop worrying about everything, brother dear.'

The caretaker interrupted their argument to request the guests to leave their luggage in the trunk. 'Pappan will take care of your luggage. You can make your way in; I will show you the rooms. The house had been locked down for renovation; Varmaji's family has temporarily shifted to an apartment in Vypeen Island.' He said in a warm baritone. He gestured towards the open front door of the palace and the two started moving, Shiuli was already inside.

He turned around and yelled '*Eda Pappa! Saamanam eduthu vekkada... evededa? Vilichaal kelkille ninnakku?*'

‘He was definitely not saying some good things, was he?’ Pakhi commented upon hearing the caretaker yell in the native language. ‘Did we have to tip him or something?’

‘I think he is calling out to the other guy he mentioned, that *Pappu* guy.’ Parosh deduced.

‘I hope so. I was expecting a warm welcome by a bunch of colorfully dressed royal family members, with the usual aarti and coco cracking.’

‘Go sue your minister.’ Parosh joked.

‘Yeah right!’

A stoutly built man clad in lungi and dirty turban arrived and picked up the guests’ luggage and carried them in. The caretaker guided the man upstairs to the room where the guests were to stay for the fortnight. After doing so he came back to Parosh and Pakhi who were watching the proceedings while standing in the center of the front hall.

‘Sir, Varma *Thampuraan* told me to arrange the best room for you so I have arranged the guest room upstairs for all three of you.’ He said.

‘Thank you dear.’ Parosh replied.

‘Sir, pardon me, but would you two like a double room for yourself and a separate room for the kid. I mean just in case...’ the caretaker winked assuming the pair to be a married couple.

‘Oh dear god no! We ... we are not married...’ Parosh stammered to respond, shocked at the caretaker’s assumption.

‘No, we are not husband-wife.’ Pakhi added.

The caretaker got confused and then came forth with another assumption, ‘Aaaah! I got it, I got it. You are not married, you are just living together. It is a fashion in big cities like yours, is not it?’ His pronunciation had all the sweetness of a Malayalee.

Pakhi hit her forehead with her palm. The caretaker looked at her action.

‘Mr....err...’ Parosh tried to recollect the Malayalee caretaker’s name.

‘Kizhekkeveetil Suresh Gopinathan... you can call me *Suresh Gopi*.’ The caretaker grinned shamelessly displaying his thirty three white teeth.

‘Mr. Gopi, I am Parosh Chandra Dutta, a writer. I am writing a biography on the life of Shri MC Jagannatha Varma. I am here to learn about Mr. Varma’s growing up days. That there...’ he said pointing towards little Shiuli who was busy inspecting the various mementos displayed on the front shelf, ‘that is my daughter, Shiuli Chandra Dutta. Do you see that thing she is holding in her hand? That is Mr. Clifford, her teddy bear and this,’ He said swooshing his arms in front of the woman next to him, Gopi’s view came back to the couple and Parosh spoke in clear words, ‘this is Pakhi. My one and only... *sister!*’

‘Ayyo! Sho! I am so sorry, Sir, I had no idea. I thought you two were...’ he didn’t complete his sentence and shamefully grinned at the two with embarrassment, ‘I will show you the room then. Please come with me.’

‘It is okay.’ Parosh forgave the ignorant man and followed him upstairs. Pakhi chuckled silently as Shiuli joined them.

‘Sir...’

‘What is it?’ Asked Parosh.

‘You look just like my favorite actor- Thala! Very beautiful you are.’ The caretaker displayed his fanatic affection for the most popular Tamil actor after Rajnikant.

‘Thank you dear, I am very much honored by your complement.’ Parosh said humbly.

‘Sir, you can use the library whenever you want and Varma *Thampuraan* has also requested you to meet all his relatives, who are living in Fort Kochi in the evening today. They are all big fans.’ Gopi said.

‘Tambura? Why do you keep calling Mr. Varma a tambura?’ Pakhi asked.

‘Not Thambura. We call him *Thampuraan*. It is the Malayalam word for His Highness. Do you understand madam?’ Gopi said to make sure the Hindi speaking lady understood the Malayalee word. He believed that everyone outside Kerala was a *Hindivala*. Little did he know that this *Hindivali* was always known as the *Bangalan* back at her office in Delhi. She was proud of that, but hated it whenever some idiot called her a *Bong*, a popularized slang for people from Bengal.

‘Oh! I understand.’ She replied imitating the caretaker’s accent.

Gopi opened the door and showed them the herculean guest room; it was decorated with mural paintings and floriated with a velvet Arabian carpet. An entire generation of cousins could be accommodated in that one room comfortably, leaving enough space for another.

Royal! That was the first word that came into Parosh’s mind after seeing the room.

‘Sir, I will leave you right now. You can freshen up and relax. I will send tea in an hour, after which we shall leave for Vypeen Island to see Thampuraan’s relatives.’

‘Sure. Goodbye Mr. Suresh Gopi.’

‘Goodbye Sir, Madam... and little Miss.’ Gopi bowed and left the room.

Chapter 9

Later that Evening ***Vypeen Island, Kerala***

The smell of ghost stories has not faded in the abandoned old dock of the seaport, the British left sixty years ago. Their feeble accounts of the haunted never left the port or its people. There were legends, little known to the world, soaring endlessly in the ears of the locals who passed it on to their grandchildren who await the arrival of the next generation to pass the baton. Only those who were unaware of the hauntings dared to step on the abandoned old dock. Shiuli Dutta was one of those who could not keep herself away from the call of the unknown. Curiosity was her other name. She was born in Gurgaon to a Bengali father and an Anglo Indian mother. After spending a lifetime in the millennium city, she finally got a chance to visit a tropical land, like the one she had seen in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. She had always loved Casper and Captain Jack Sparrow. However, she could not keep herself away from the gloominess of her past. The momentary joy of being in a new place gave way to sorrow again. Her father, Parosh Chandra Dutta, was on a mission to pen down the story of India's next Prime Minister and get it ready right after the elections. This was the deal he had with his publisher. While he was busy having a warm cup of coffee with Varma's relatives at Vypeen Island, little Shiuli slipped out of the house and ran to the beach with her dearest teddy bear. Even Pakhi did not notice her niece leaving.

When they had arrived in Cochin, it was just after Christmas and the city was still lingering under Christmas bells and carols. There were talks about a bomb blast in the northern region of Kannur. Over a dozen people had died in the blast, however she could only think of her mother who died a year ago.

And now, almost a year later, the beautiful girl was walking with Mr. Clifford on the sands of the Island of Vypeen. She stopped. There was just the sea ahead, and the emptiness of the horizon beyond. She felt dizzy for a moment. The smell of the sea punched her on the nose and butterflies hit the walls of her stomach.

This is the end of the land; maybe my mother is now a mermaid in this sea. Shiuli thought as she closed her eyes and sighed. Suddenly she felt the lingering aroma of a previously unknown scent, which slowly transformed into an orphic Gregorian chant. She was forced to turn left and slowly opened her eyes only to be left mesmerized by what she saw.

A decaying mansion stood at the edge of the shore, enthroned on the top of a great cliff, with the violent depth of the sea right below. She heard church bells sing to the tune of the hour and breeze from the sea calling her to the mansion. The view itself was a splendid portrait: the sun at the top left of the picture with a bed of clear blue and mildly quivering water under the line of the horizon, while on the left stood the great mansion. A Victorian building coupled with traditional Chera architecture in holy matrimony on the edge of a thick

brown cliff. A captivating sight which any artist would love to replicate on her canvas, a frame so enigmatic which every photographer would dream of capturing in her camera. A visual so pompous that it filled the mind with a million words of praise yet left the heart speechless.

Shiuli felt her mind slipping away into an alluring trance. This mansion was on the tip of Fort Cochin, the shore on the other side of the island. It was her next destination. The mansion was calling out her name. She could hear it and involuntarily her body gave in and those two beautiful feet started walking towards the dock. Her eyes were cold as if they were stoned.

Her quest just began. She prepared for her arrival at the destination.

The Clifford Mansion.

Chapter 10

Varma's Apartment, Vypeen Island

The Varmas were engrossed in a tremulous discussion with the author, although his sister, the reputed journalist was literally unknown to the Malayalee royal family. This was typical, people in Kerala preferred local news and movies over national ones, owing to the adhesiveness to their mother tongue, Malayalam. And it was highly unlikely that a mass English author of Indian origin would have such a huge impact in the lives of the average Malayalee, for they have a trait by virtue of which one would not even look at books written by people like him. They always preferred international authors or award winning ones when it came to non-Malayalam literature. Dutta's stronghold had been Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata where people poured in packs to buy his entertaining novels. Pakhi felt herself getting alienated as the discussion went on and that is when she looked around for her niece. Shiuli was not to be seen in the room; she made a quick search in the other rooms and then went outside the apartment looking for the little girl. The apartment's front gate opened to a sandy shore that welcomed the saline breeze from the Arabian Sea. The view was brilliant and anyone with the least passion for art would end up creating a masterpiece when the sun went down from that view. There were very few people on the beach, mostly couples from the apartment. She did not find her niece making sand castles as she had expected. Anxiety started growing inside of her as she took few steps towards the eastern dock. A fisherman halted the young journalist by stepping in front of her and warned 'Madam, please do not go to the old dock, it's not a good time.'

She was startled to hear an angler speaking such fluent English, 'I am sorry, what old dock? I am looking for my niece. She was with us upstairs, and then she seems to have disappeared. Have you seen a fair skinned girl with Brown eyes, about this tall?' she held her palm face down and placed it near her abdomen, 'Have you seen her? She's fair with pink cheeks and light brown hair cut short. She'd be carrying a teddy bear.'

'Madam, I understand your anxiety, but I am afraid I saw a girl like the one described pass this way.' The fisherman recollected.

'Why did not you stop her? You are stopping a grown up woman like me, so why did not you stop her from going to the eastern dock?'

'I was on my boat; I saw her standing right here. She was looking at the Visitor's Mansion on the other side of the cliff. I blinked my eye and when I opened, she had disappeared.'

'Disappeared?' Pakhi was startled.

'She must have jumped onto the last ferry or something. But I did not see any ferry around.'

'The last ferry? What do you mean by the last ferry?' She asked.

‘We do not carry tourists to the eastern dock after sunset, so the ferry and boats that are open for the public run only until sunset. It is not an auspicious place for outsiders after sunset.’ There was a clear sign of warning in the fisherman’s throaty voice.

Perplexed by what she just heard, Pakhi tried to negotiate ‘But I must go and get my niece back.’

‘She is definitely there. But you must not go.’

‘Are you insane? She is nine, and like you said, an *outsider*! I am going there and I need,’ she glanced at the fisherman’s wooden boat, ‘your help!’

‘I am afraid I cannot...’

‘Just keep this and take me there,’ Pakhi emptied her wallet into the fisherman’s withered hand, ‘let’s go now!’

The fisherman was not sure about what he was doing, but he could not refuse so much money. There were half a dozen thousand notes which was more money than what he would earn in a month. Enough money to feed his entire family. He turned around and pushed his boat back into the sea. Pakhi was already in the boat with an oar in her hand. She tossed the second oar at the fisherman, he was quick to catch it and they set sail towards the eastern dock. Pakhi held the oar with her left hand; she brought her cellphone out with the right hand and quickly sent an SOS message to her brother with her location details. It read thus,

Shiuli lost. Must have gone to eastern dock alone. M on ma way. Cm quickly!

Pakhi’s nerves were freezing with every passing moment and the feeling of eerie delirium crept back into her strong willed mind. The huge coconut palms lined up in horrifying silhouettes on the eastern dock reminded her of the fact that Shiuli was fascinated by coconut palms earlier that day while coming from the airport. She prayed for Shiuli’s well-being and safety.

Ten minutes later, the fisherman carefully pulled the boat to the eastern dock and Pakhi threw away the ore into his boat and jumped out on the shore.

‘Would you please ask these people if they had seen my niece?’ Pakhi pleaded.

‘Madam, I am afraid I cannot. I do not wish to succumb to the evil this land places on the outsiders who step on it after sunset. Please forgive me; you may have your money back.’ The fisherman hesitatingly took out the currency notes that she had handed him minutes ago. He had a gloomy thwart in his face, the gloom of departing with something priceless.

‘Keep the money.’ Pakhi dejectedly said and rushed towards the couple of shops that were still open – a tea stall and a souvenir shop that sold kites and hats. They were closing down for the day as well.

‘Did you see a little girl around here somewhere?’ She asked the tea seller.

The tea-seller looked at his neighbor helplessly. He could not understand what the *outsider* had spoken in a foreign language.

‘*Ividennu oru kochu pennu poyathu kondo ennu chodichatha ee sthree. Kandutundo?*’ came a familiar voice from behind, it was the fisherman. Pakhi was more than thankful to the *literate* fisherman.

‘*Kandirunnu, aval mele keru poyi. Aa pretha kottarathil!*’ the tea-seller explained in his native tongue with utmost horror in his small eyes. The horror was magnified by the light of the lantern.

‘What did he say?’ Pakhi turned towards the fisherman and asked.

‘He says the girl had taken the path...’ he continued in a whisper, ‘to the haunted mansion!’

Pakhi did not waste a second to hear the next exchange of words in the native tongue. She switched on her cellphone’s flashlight and ran up the curved path that led to the great mansion on top of the cliff. There were voices that called out from the back trying to stop her from committing such a grave mistake but she was determined on getting back her niece. She ran and panted upon reaching the top, and there it stood right before her, a giant mansion and a red sky behind it. The broken glass windows seemed like vents of grief stricken eyes that were laughing at the young *outsider*. She closed her eyes to forget the horrifying scene. With a heavy sigh of air, she opened her eyes to look around. There was no sign of Shiuli or anything related to her.

Oh god! I do not believe in you, but I need you right now. Please help me find Shiuli. Please!

She prayed to the One whom she did not believe- God. After the windows, it was the turn of the dried up bushes and tall coconut palms to pick on her mind. The sea breeze had taken form of a heavier wind and it pushed into the woman’s spine and froze the blood flow in her veins. She noticed that the front door had been open; perhaps Shiuli had entered the mansion.

An outsider inside!

She took another deep breath, ‘There are no ghosts, no legends. They are just superficial tales made up by the illiterate and ignorant natives. I am a woman of the city, and an educated and independent woman, I do not believe in such things and I do not fear ghosts.’

A *Chennaya* or jackal howled from somewhere behind and it was enough to put a temporary break on her heart’s functioning. Her frozen blood was melted by horror and vaporized inside her veins. She took a step forward.

‘What are you doing?’ said a vaguely familiar voice as Pakhi felt a cold hand on her shivering back.

Pakhi was shocked by the touch and voice. Her eyes filled up and she turned around slowly, hoping that it was not the ghost that haunted the mansion.

‘Do you know that this house is haunted?’ the voice spoke. It was a familiar voice Pakhi, not belonging to any of her close relatives or friends, but she had definitely heard it somewhere.

She opened her eyes and a figure revealed itself. The figure of a man who was overweight and had tanned skin, along with a vertical stroke of *Gopichandan* on his forehead; a familiar round face which she tried to place.

Both of them looked at each other trying to recollect where they had seen each other before.

‘Ah! I have seen you. You are the *womanu* who forgot her *phonu* in the Delhi metro, are not you?’ The man seemed to recollect.

‘Yes I remember you. Mr. Iyer?’ Pakhi stammered doubtfully as she was relieved to see a familiar face at the most unfamiliar spot.

‘You remember my name, but what are you doing here?’

‘I... I... my niece she came here, she is inside I believe. Please help me.’ She had never imagined in her slightest dreams that she would be begging for help from a total stranger. This was the second instance from the day.

‘*Ayyo Guruvayurappa!* How is it possible?’ he exclaimed in a state of confusion.

‘Why? People saw her walking up the path.’

‘Yes, I heard, but it is impossible.’ Iyer started walking towards the door in amazement. He stopped at the door, placed his right hand under the door’s handle, and spoke in disbelief,

‘I had locked this door right before sunset with my hands. How can it be opened like this? Nobody else has its keys. Your niece could not have come here. She must be on Vypeen Island only.’ He turned around with wide open eyes.

‘Please save my niece.’ Pakhi went on her knees and pleaded.

‘You should not be here; this place is unholy for outsiders.’

‘Why the fuck is everyone essaying this *outsider* thing? I do not believe in myths or legends.’

‘Myths are for children. This legend is a fact, and the mansion is visited by the legend every time an *outsider* steps on this land. Beware of...’ the next three words were spoken in words frozen like ice, ‘...*that frequent visitor.*’

There was a shrieking cry of a little girl from inside. They heard it and the wind blew hard as a school of bats resting inside the mansion rushed through the broken window in a state of utter commotion. Iyer unlocked the door and rushed inside with Pakhi.

Chapter 11

Five minutes ago

The door opened by itself and Shiuli effortlessly slid inside Clifford Mansion. She was welcomed by abandoned cobwebs that had inhabited the residence for ages, interwoven into an intrinsic work of art. She spat out the dust that kissed her mouth. The wall was studded with crumbling material and mural paintings of the long gone owners of the mansion. Despite the darkness, she could see everything clearly as if somebody had lit up the entire mansion just for her. She looked at each picture with an extraneous marvel of recognition as if she had known all of them before. She walked past the hallway into the dining room where there was a life size portrait of a middle aged British man with a polished wooden walking stick resting stylishly under the palm of his left hand. The mighty grin on his face conveyed vanity and simplicity at the same time. Shiuli was lured towards the portrait and determined was she to touch the portrait with her hand.

There was a howl of a Chennaaya outside somewhere and it was accompanied by the sound of footsteps; quick and restless ones. The footsteps were getting closer and closer and before she knew it, something pulled with sheer force. The strength of the arm that pulled up Shiuli forced her to turn around. The trance was broken and all of a sudden the imaginary light that illuminated the mansion disappeared and Shiuli screamed in horror upon witnessing the darkness. She shrieked for help. Another hand placed itself on her mouth and she could not scream anymore. She resisted with the strength of the weak.

The hand brought a lantern near her and the milky face of the nine-year-old glowed golden yellow. Shiuli saw what held her; the diabolic hands of a demonic man with a chiseled face, broken teeth and a rotten smile of his wicked lips.

‘You pesky little rodent, who sent you here?’ The man asked.

His words were accompanied by the smell of tobacco that was mixed with something weird and unknown to the girl; she noted the redness in his eyes.

‘I think the little girl cannot speak because I am not letting her speak. Let us rip her body apart after having some fun with it, what do you say?’ The second man suggested. He was the one who had kept his hand in her mouth.

‘Only an idiot would walk into this mansion at this hour and I guess you have been sent for us to feast upon.’ He burst into a luciferous laugh and his partner joined in.

Shiuli was afraid. Her eyes filled with tears and she wanted to cry, but alas she suffocated as the man had covered her nostrils along with her mouth.

The sound of thunder broke out in the sky outside awakening the hundred odd bats that were resting upstairs. The cloud of furious bats rushed downstairs and made their way towards the hallway where the two men were about to torture little Shiuli.

‘What the fuck is happening?’ The man with chiseled face asked.

‘I think the thunder woke them up.’ The other reasoned.

But before they could say anything else, they witnessed something extraordinary. A spark ignited itself on the wall that gradually turned itself into an oval glow that surrounded the big life-sized portrait of the EnglishmanEnglishmanEnglishman. The two men saw the light particles bursting into the canvas and a moment of blinding illumination left the most astonishing marvel in front of them. The EnglishmanEnglishman took a three dimensional form and was standing right in front of the villains who had captured the little girl. There was anger in the man's sharp eyes, fresh as if they came out of a painting on the wall, and indeed they had. The projection of the EnglishmanEnglishmanEnglishman moved towards the two men who dropped the little girl on the dirty floor. The white man raised his walking stick mightily and wended it on the scoundrels. One of them turned around and ran for his life. The other one with the chiseled face seemed paralyzed by the paranormal sight and urinated on the floor. The smell was dirty and that of malted beverage. The cloud of bats followed the path of the white man's walking stick and surrounded the scoundrel. The EnglishmanEnglishmanEnglishman pushed his right hand into the blazer's breast-pocket and started searching for something. An air of disappointment hit his face as he came out empty handed. He sighed and ordered the bats to attack the goon. The ruffian ran away trying to dodge the bats.

Shiuli witnessed the marvel, shocked and relieved at the same time. The white man's projection looked down at the girl. There was anxiety in her eyes but not a bit of fear of the apparition. The projection's stare turned into a friendly grin and gave her his right hand. Shiuli stretched out her hand curiously when she heard a woman screaming out her name.

'Shiuli, Oh God! Are you alright, darling?' Pakhi ran towards her with the flashlight. She was accompanied by a fat man whom Shiuli did not recognize.

'Pishi! Yes I am alright, thanks to...' she turned around but there was nobody, and the magical light had disappeared, '...*the visitor*...' she whispered.

The anxious aunt hugged her niece. She heard more footsteps outside. The fat man was flashing his torchlight down the stairs and on the wall to look for any other intruders.

'They were drug abusers. Very common in this part of the city. It's an isolated place and nobody ever dares to come up here. The perfect *safe house*!' the fat Iyer said conclusively.

'Were these the haunting visitors they were talking about?' Pakhi asked while holding Shiuli tightly to her bosom.

'No... No, they are just intruders, the living ones.' He switched off the flashlight and walked towards them. 'The one who visits this mansion frequently is not amongst the living.'

'What if they were...' Pakhi was interrupted by the sound of people rushing in. A familiar voice spoke first.

'Shiuli... Piku... God, are you girls all right? We saw two people jumping into the sea, what was that?' Parosh asked as he panted having ascended the path at the speed of the wind. He continued, 'I got your SOS message but I could not connect to your number. Your number was unreachable.'

'It is difficult to get a good range for *outsiders* here,' Iyer reprimanded in a haunting tone.

'Who is this gentleman, I believe we have not been introduced yet.'

‘My name is Iyer, Ramaprasad Iyer. I am the caretaker of Clifford Mansion.’

‘I am Parosh Chandra Dutta and I think we should get out of here quickly before something befalls us.’

Shiuli did not speak a word. She was as silent as the sea that had calmed down after the thunder and lightning. Parosh picked her up and carried her outside. Pakhi and Iyer followed. Parosh understood that she needed some time and extra care to drive off the trauma of facing such a haunting situation. Shiuli had grown pale. She embraced her father and rested her chin on her father’s shoulder and then looked ahead at the wall at the far end of the dining room where the portrait was hung. It was dark, very dark. The imaginary light had disappeared and so had the projection of the white man.

And then when she had reached the doorstep, the portrait that was now far away down the hallway, and she witnessed another miracle; there was a bright spark across the hall that was followed by a crackling laugh which was heard by none but Shiuli. ‘Thank you Mr. Visitor...’ she whispered.

Chapter 12

Later that night

After an adventurous evening, the Dutta family returned to Varma's palace in Tripunithara. However, upon returning from that haunted mansion, the Varmas deliberately avoided talking about it. Neither were the Duttas in that state of mind to talk about it, so they came back to the accommodation arranged for them .

Gopi had already made delicious Malayalee *sadhya* for dinner. He had no idea that the Duttas would be too exhausted to enjoy the delicacies, as he did not have any idea about their misadventure. Shiuli hardly tasted anything apart from the rice and *payasam*. She went off to sleep early. Pakhi followed her to bed.

'Mishti, how did you reach that place?' Pakhi asked.

'I do not want to talk about it. Let me sleep, I am tired.' Shiuli resisted.

'Come on.'

'Why? You will not believe it anyway.' Shiuli said as she burrowed under the blanket.

'The fisherman told me that the only way to go to the other side was the ferry which had been closed down before you left. So, how did you get there if you did not take the ferry? You cannot swim, I know that.' Shiuli deduced with the instincts of an experienced journalist.

Shiuli yawned and then uttered, 'I was taken...' She gazed at her aunt's expression and continued, '...by sparks of light.'

'By what?' Pakhi exclaimed in disbelief. 'Good night Pishi, this topic is over. You will not believe me. Sweet dreams.' Shiuli said and pulled the blanket over her face.

Pakhi left the room.

Parosh came back after an hour. Shiuli was fast asleep. She had slept holding Mr. Clifford close to her chest. Parosh kissed on her forehead and went back to his bed. Parosh and Pakhi had a short discussion over the evening's happening and few minutes later all the lights inside the room were turned off. They were all asleep.

Chapter 13

It was dark and the walls of the room transformed into formless clouds of grey, blue and white. A magical light appeared in front of Shiuli who was lying on her bed amidst the newly appeared clouds. She looked around, confused was she. She saw clouds everywhere and beyond those clouds was a suffocating oooccupation of nothingness.

The magical light took form of a human figure – a beautiful white female with the wings of a fairy clipped to her bare back. Shiuli could never forget that face; the face of her beloved mother. It was an apparition of her past. The apparition put forth her right hand and gestured with her fingers to come to her. Shiuli smiled. All of a sudden, it started getting darker and the warm pleasantness on the apparition's face turned into an unpleasant gloom. The darkness started weakening the bright angelic apparition. Her mother cried for help before being completely consumed by the greyish darkness. The shriek hurt Shiuli.

Shiuli woke up from the nightmare. Her little heart was beating faster than bubbles bursting in boiling water. She looked around with sleepy eyes. It was dark and there were no clouds. It was the room where she was put to sleep by her father. Parosh and Pakhi were fast asleep in two corners of the room on separate beds. She was relieved to see her father and aunt. She was about to close her eyes again when she realized that something was missing.

Mr. Clifford was gone!

She quickly looked under the blanket, but in vain. Mr. Clifford was nowhere on the bed. She must have dropped him on the floor. Crawling under the bed at night was the scariest thing to do for her. There was that fear of finding a monster under the bed, but Shiuli loved Mr. Clifford so much that she put aside all her fears. She looked under the bed. It was dark so she could not see anything. Suddenly she heard a jingling sound behind her. She quickly turned around; there were the same sparks of light. Those that had lit up the mansion for her earlier that evening. They moved outside into the corridor through the open door. Shiuli got up quickly and followed the sparks. The swarm of sparks was enough to illuminate the corridor for Shiuli. They took a turn to the right and went up the stairs that led to the terrace of the palace. The terrace door opened on its own, the swarm panned the terrace and so did Shiuli. The swarm of sparks lured her towards the southwest corner of the terrace. She spotted Mr. Clifford, lying on the floor in the corner of the terrace where the southern and the western walls met. The swarm span around Mr. Clifford and raised him up in the air.

Shiuli feared that the swarm of light particles would drop her beloved teddy bear down three floors below. She marched across and grabbed Mr. Clifford from the air. The swarm of light quickly gathered around the girl and raised her off the floor. She was fascinated to see each light particle from point zero.

They were fireflies.

A swarm of fireflies. In her amusement she forgot the fact that she was well over five feet above the terrace floor. The swarm slowly carried her over the parapet and off it carried the girl into the distant sky over the sleeping town.

She held Mr. Clifford tightly in her arms. Shiuli was flying over the city.

Chapter 14

The magical fireflies carried Shiuli over bus stops, bridges, statues and numerous buildings of historical importance. The city of Cochin looked enchanting at night from above the world so high. She underwent quite a few emotions during her flight; however, fear was not one of them. The lightness in her stomach made her lose her breath a couple of times but she kept herself steady. They were coming to the edge of the land. She saw the most fascinating visual – of land meeting sea and the rippling waters of the Arabian Sea gently hitting itself against the edge of the sandy shore. She noticed a bright white spot at one place, immediately looked up. It was the lunar masterpiece; the full moon. She looked down and saw her shadow passing over the moon's reflection on the water's surface. Then there was land again beyond a sparse jungle of tropical palms that ended at the edge of a cliff. The cliff that housed the colossal mansion. Shiuli was right above the mansion. The fireflies took a downward dip and Shiuli felt an up thrust surging from her intestine that gave a tickling sensation in her tummy. She was about to crash land right in front of the mansion's majestic door. However, with increasing velocity the fireflies carried the girl forward right before her feet touched the ground. She would have knocked herself right on the door, but the door opened on its own and let her pass through like a miniature jet. The fireflies accelerated and carried her through the long halfway without knocking down any antiquities or cobwebs en route.

At last they slowed down and stopped in the dining room, right in front of the EnglishmanEnglishmanEnglishman's life sized portrait. This was exactly how she was transported to the mansion earlier in the evening; by the magical fireflies.

The magical fireflies detached themselves from Shiuli's aura and swiveled into the portrait. Once again, they covered the portrait. The light sparks imaged into the thick fabric of the canvas and then there was a bright illumination.

Shiuli wiped off the strand of cobweb, which had stuck to her tenderly sharp upper lip. The girl looked around in wonder. Beyond the glow emerged a figure so bright and lustrous that even the darkest of insulations would timidly reflect the glorious image. The fireflies detached from the canvas and gently pulled the projection of the EnglishmanEnglishmanEnglishman out of it. They formed an aura around the projection's head.

She stood face to face with the ghost.

The ghost of the EnglishmanEnglishmanEnglishman.

The gentleman who visited the mansion; *perhaps the one they called That Frequent Visitor.*

Chapter 15

The brown eyes of Shiuli were perfectly round and they stared wide open at the magical projection of the man in the portrait. Was this some kind of a miracle or another dream from which she had to awaken herself, she wondered.

The ghost prepared his dried up throat to commence an interrogatory conversation ‘Who are you, little girl?’ he asked in the most pleasant baritone she had ever heard.

She looked at him, from toe to head, and she asked, ‘Why don’t you tell me who *you* are?’

‘You trespass into my property and ask about me? How dare you, little girl?’

‘Are you a ghost?’ she asked curiously.

‘What do you think I am? I just came out of this picture on the wall.’ He pointed to the canvas behind him without turning, ‘Of course, I am a ghost!’

Shiuli was fascinated by the confirmation. She had indeed come face to face with a ghost. Something she had always wanted to do after watching the Casper movie. She took a step towards the ghost with a growing hope of touching the supernatural. She dug her fingers into the teddy bear that she was holding in her left hand and stopped suddenly. She looked up at the ghost and asked, ‘What do I call you, Mr. Ghost?’

The ghost of the Englishman was taken aback by her innocent question; he groaned steeply, ‘I think you do not understand the meaning of a *ghost*. Do you?’

‘Yes, I do. Ghosts are dead people.’

‘Then why are not you...’ he bent and plucked out his eyes off their sockets and screamed, ‘... afraid of me?’

A hot stinking smell blew out of the ghost’s mouth and Shiuli grimaced in disgust.

‘Cut it out, dude. You look so ugly this way.’ She requested covering her nostrils with her fingers of the right hand.

The ghost closed his mouth, and put back his eyeballs into their sockets.

‘That is much better. You look handsome again.’ She applauded, ‘You look like Benedict Cumberbach, dude.’

‘So, you are not afraid of me? Are you pretending not to be?’

‘Why should I be afraid of you? People are afraid of ghosts because they are unknown to them.’ She tried to explain what her aunt had told her few nights ago.

‘But you do not know me, young child.’

‘I would like to know you, if you allow me to do so, Mr. Ghost.’

‘That explains why I did not see fear in your angelic brown eyes earlier in the evening. People come to my mansion and run for their lives upon encountering me. Some run

straight off the cliff and fall into the great sea and then they say that the ghost killed them. Blame it on the poor old ghost!’ he sighed.

‘The thieves ran away too.’

‘Yes, they did. I can smell that idiotic scoundrel’s loo here on the floor.’

Shiuli chuckled, ‘You saved me from those thieves, so you cannot be bad. I know that.’

‘I do not like intruders. I do not exactly remember the reason behind that, but I just do not like them.’ The ghost said scratching his head, trying to recollect from dusty chambers of memory inside his brain.

‘Nobody likes thieves. They are bad people. So, why are you a ghost, Mr. Ghost?’

‘What do you mean by that, young lady?’

‘My Pishi says...’

The ghost interrupted Shiuli immediately, ‘Pishi? Do you belong to the great province of Bengal?’ The ghost’s face had lit up.

‘Province? Dude, where are you from, the ice age? And yes, my parents are from Kolkata.’ She revealed.

‘My dear, I am from Calcutta too.’ The ghost said joyfully. He felt elated upon learning that this young lady was also from the land of the *mishti doi*.

‘But you look like a foreigner to me.’ Shiuli doubted.

‘So do you!’ The ghost accused.

‘My mother *was* an Anglo-Indian.’

‘Was? What is she now? Did she change colors?’ He joked.

The question brought back the old gloom over Shiuli’s angelic face. She looked down at the floor and her eyes filled up with tears again. She sulked, ‘She is not with us anymore. Jesus called her back.’

The ghost felt sorry for her. Immediately he kneeled down and rested the walking stick down on the floor and with the same hand raised the girl’s chin. He saw her shedding drops of tears.

‘There, my little angel. Your mother would never want to see you cry like this from up there.’ He consoled her and wiped off her tears. The moment his transcendental fingers made contact with the moist skin of Shiuli, there was a soft light of friction that worked like a healing balm over the wet tears.

‘How do you know that she is watching me?’

‘Because people become stars after they die.’ The ghost explained.

‘I knew it, but Pishi would never agree.’ She said sulkily.

‘Oh dear! What else did your Pishi tell you about dead people?’

‘She said that,’ Shiuli sulked a final drop of tear and continued, ‘that only those dead people became ghosts who could not fulfill their purpose at the time of death. Is that so?’

‘I am afraid that is correct.’

‘What was the purpose that you could not fulfill?’ Shiuli asked.

Once again the ghost went brain-searching, ‘I do not remember exactly.’

‘But why?’

‘I do not know, child.’ He replied in a helpless tone. He looked beyond the girl; the moon’s light illuminated the doorstep.

‘Don’t you remember anything at all? How you died, what were you when you lived?’ the girl was intrigued by the apparition, ‘What is your name?’

‘Yes, I do remember a few things until my death but it has been a long while ago.’

‘I think you should start recollecting from the beginning. Maybe you will gradually remember everything towards the end and also find that incomplete purpose of your life.’ Shiuli jumped in excitement. ‘Then we can fulfill that purpose, set you free and you can join the other stars.’

‘It might take a long time.’ The ghost tried to evade the girl’s suggestion.

‘*Every ghost has a story to tell...*’

‘Who said that? Your Pishi?’

‘Hari Kumar! He’s my favorite writer, you see. So, what’s your story?’

The ghost picked up his walking stick from the floor. Once again he put his hand into the breast pocket of his blazer. It was followed by an expression of childish disappointment on his face. He brought out an empty hand.

‘What is it?’ Shiuli asked reading the expression on the ghost’s face, ‘I saw you doing this earlier. What is it that you have or had in your pocket?’

‘My tiebreaker. It is not there anymore.’ The ghost revealed.

‘Tie breaker?’

‘A rare silver coin,’ the ghost stared ahead and then said, ‘We should narrate my story over a cup of tea.’ He suggested.

‘I don’t drink tea. Pishi says tea is for bad girls.’

‘Oh bollocks!’ He swore.

‘What’s that, Mr. Ghost?’ she enquired.

‘Err... I meant *bullocks*.’ He feigned with embarrassment, ‘I shall get some tea for myself.’

‘That’s great and Mr. Ghost, my name is Shiuli Dutta.’ She introduced herself with a pleasant smile.

‘Ahaan! What a graceful name for a charming angel. The name reminds me of someone dear to me, I do not remember who it was very well, though.’ His eyes shot to the teddy bear in her left hand, ‘and what may be the furry gentleman’s name?’

‘Oh! This is Mr. Clifford, my mother presented him to me when before she left.’

‘The name sounds very familiar. Anyway child, I am going to take you on a journey back in time... This is my story, the story of,’ in a charade of a second, the ghost got up on his shining feet mightily claiming, ‘Baxter... Richard Baxter. The one they think is...’ he prepared his throat roared, ‘... *that Frequent Visitor*.’

Part 2

The Ghost's Story

Chapter 16

25th July 1942

Eden Gardens, Calcutta

It was an ensemble of aristocratic white folk with the sparse elite of the native brown folk at the pavilion of the most magnificent cricket stadium in Asia. They had all gathered for a quirky one-sided game of cricket between the Queen's men (that was of course us) and the finest athletes representing the native province of Bengal. It was more of a tea party for the women and an occasion to swap partners for the infidels during the game hours. I was neither one of them, no dear, nor was I among the spectators. I was one of the queen's men, more specifically, the skipper of the eleven playing on the damp turf of Eden Gardens; the temporary captain of a temporary English cricket team.

Cricket was my life and here I was, leading my country for the first time in a game against the domestic side. And what made this even more special was the fact that I was celebrating my twenty-fourth birthday that day. I was born in this same old city where every day was nothing less than a vivid celebration of life; the city of joy – Calcutta.

The match was totally poised in our favor, however, we had been a wee bit over confident the day before and that had cost us few precious wickets. Well, we had been dominating the game for three days after putting the local boys to bat first on a pitch that would make batsmen succumb to their demons. We dismissed them for a shameful 53 runs in the second innings and on the fourth day we needed a meager 157 runs to conquer the charity game. We were raising funds for our soldiers who were fighting it out against the Germans in the Second World War. However, at stake was the pride of the English. We could not lose to a pinching local side of a slave colony. There were not many good players in the Bengal side, but those who were there had been bribed handsomely so that they would not perform. The English always wanted to win, by hook or crook. Nevertheless, here was a disappointing scenario for the English crowd to see their men lose out to the Bangla tigers. We had lost our top order in the first over itself. Maybe it was lack of practice as the game of cricket had been called off since the World War began in 1939. Whatever the reason, I had to stay on as the anchor of a sinking English vessel and I did that. Having arrived at three down for five in the second over, I teamed with the next five batsmen adding a hundred and fifty runs before the penultimate man was out bowled by the spin king of the Bangla cricket team.

The last man arrived at the crease. It was my own brother, Winston Baxter, the spearhead of our bowling attack. Our team needed just two runs to win and, oh! By the way I had piled on ninety eight of my team's total of one hundred and fifty five runs.

I saw him heading towards me at the half crease with that stammering grin on his cranky face. The smile always made me nervous. He was the best pace bowler the English

cricket team had ever produced and I am glad that we played for the same side, as I can never imagine facing his deadly yorkers in my wildest nightmares. As deadly as the bowler he was, as pathetic a batsman he was, holding a record of averaging zero point twenty in his thirty nine first class innings.

Winston stopped near me and muttered helplessly, 'Brother, what do I do?'

'Just stand there. Do not slog. Save your wicket. It is just one ball, whatever you do, do not get out.'

'Is it the last ball of this over?' he asked.

'Yes, indeed.' I replied patting on his back with my gloved left hand.

'Oh dear Lord! Thank you.' He seemed relieved upon realizing the fact. He marched his way to the striker's end.

I looked at him, nervous with sinking expectation. This was not about pride or ego for me, but as it was my first game as the skipper of the English side and I wanted to steer my side to victory, if not anything else.

He prepared his stance and the spin king of the local side threw a googly and the moment pitched on the surface it spun in the oppressing side and bounced to hit my brother on the right thigh. This was followed by a collaborative appeal by the bowler and keeper. My brother looked down hopelessly. I doubted if it would have hit the stumps with that bounce and the umpire from Hampshire shared a similar view. Not out was the verdict. My brother shall finally stay unbeaten in a game even if it had been just a ball that he faced.

We met midway, at the eleventh yard.

'Make sure that you run fast. We need two runs, nothing short of that.' I commanded my player.

'And what if you do not find any scoring shot until the last ball.'

'I will. Now, you must stop breaking the jaws of those Australian batsmen while bowling. It's their curses that do not let you bat. One might break yours someday.' I tried to inject some humor into his tense mind.

'Take it away, brother.' Winston wished and I was on my way to the crease.

I heard thundering somewhere far away in the city; it was growing darker with every spanning minute. The day could be called off any moment now. The Bangla captain had roped in his fastest bowler from the playing eleven and I always enjoyed blasting his rocket speed deliveries out of the park.

He roared in at a hundred miles, I raised my bat well over my knee ready to loft the ball straight over his head, in case he went for a usual yorker at the death. I had to be quicker than him and a presumptive forward drive would make the yorker seem like a full length delivery. I stood my ground and I was going for the loft. I locked my view on the ball and pierced through the air towards my ankle and advanced according to my plan. With my bottom hand, I drove the bat forth, connecting with the ball right before it hit my foot and lofted it over the bowler's head.

'Run!' my brother screamed from the other end and started running towards my end.

I was confident of my shot and stood there looking at the ball that flew over the long mid-off and into the park; it went for a six. The local boys were disappointed after coming

this close to victory. The umpire signaled a six. I threw my bat in the air joyfully. My brother lifted me up in his strong arms just as he used to do when I was a little white boy in school. My greatest support was with me like always.

The spectators were on their feet, giving a standing ovation to the winning English side's skipper who scored a century in his first game as captain. The twenty-four year old skipper, who showed more maturity on the field, leading a sinking ship full of veterans right from the front, was enough to shun the critics. The legendary batsman, Len Hutton, himself walked down the park and congratulated me,

'I am glad that English cricket is in right hands, after all.' He blessed me and those words were simply priceless as they had come from my idol.

Before I knew it, my entire team joined in and carried me around the ground in jubilant celebration. That was the best day of my life, and something I remember very closely. English cricket had a new name to trust in its almanacs, Richard Baxter.

Chapter 17

That day, our dressing room was filled with dancing white people. It was not that we were unaware of the dying and suffering countrymen back home, in fact the fund raised by ticket sales would be going in aid of those children who had been affected by the war in Europe. I sat down on a bench and started untying the knots of my pad. Winston stood a few feet away from me with a fine young lady. They were holding each other's hands and then they kissed each other.

Lucky guy! I thought. My brother had finally found someone who loved him. Her name was Cecily, twenty years *young*, tender and beautiful like a Swiss prim rose. They perfectly complemented each other.

'How long do you plan to be content with the petty love life of your elder brother, son?' a shrill voice spoke from behind.

I turned around and exclaimed, 'Oh Mother! I thought that you would not make it.'

'Oh dear, how could I miss my child's debut game as captain,' she said, still glaring at the couple who were sharing an extended moment of intimacy. She continued, 'especially when we were sinking.'

I immediately got up and embraced her. She pulled herself away, 'Oh dear Lord, what are you trying to do? Look at yourself; you are all dirty, smelling like a dead swine from Scrooge's first Christmas.' She accused me referring to Dickens' classic.

'Go tidy up, then we shall have tea in the garden.' She paused to take a step towards me and hummed, 'Dr. Briggs is here with his daughter, it is just a matter of a couple of pleasantries before the girl and her father would completely fall head over heels for the young centurion skipper.'

'Oh Mother, I have already told you a hundred thousand times that I do not wish to get hitched so young. Why do you keep bringing these narrow minded suitors for me? Are you planning to enter the matchmaking business?' I expressed my emotions.

'Well, she is a fine young lady and shall make a perfect and wonderful mother.' She tried to justify herself.

I hated arguing with my mother especially when she wore that black hat of hers that gave her the appearance of a witch from Stanford.

'I need my own time to find the lady with whom I shall spend my entire life. It has to happen on its own, when it is time. Marriage should be the result of love between the couple getting married and not brute force from their parents.' I tried to explain my philosophy of love at first sight to an ageing orthodox.

'So that you may end up with some down-market tramp like Cecily?' she said shooting a glance at the young woman who was holding my brother's arms in the distance.

‘She is a fine young lady, she loves my brother.’

‘She is the daughter of a sailor, not a captain, for God’s sake. We belong to an aristocratic family; we cannot share our status with such peasantry folks.’

‘Rubbish! I do not comply with your narrow minded views. It is my life and I shall... I beg your pardon; I *will* lead my life the way I want.’ I stated strongly.

‘I won’t let you do anything stupid.’ My mother ordered.

That Hitler who waged a war in Europe had a sister in my mother and I loathed her. She was the bitter seed of lime in our sweet juice. One should not bite the seed if found, simply spit it out. I had programmed my mind that way. It was time to spit out the bitter seed.

‘Mother, if you shall excuse me.’ I threw away the pads and walked past my mother. I smiled at my brother, Cecily and few other cheerful faces on my way out.

There was always one parent among the two, who took an oath at the time of marriage to stand on the heads of their children when they are born. They start by over indulging and spoon-feeding them throughout childhood before gradually becoming these nightmarish puppets that shall judge you day after day and drive you insane with insecure expectations and quantified ego. In most of our English houses, that one parent is the father. However, in my case, that one dictating Hitler had been my mother.

Oh whatever, the sun was going to come down in a couple of minutes and I was padding down the streets of Calcutta. The crowd is a bittersweet commotion here and one can see all sorts of folk moving up, down, in and around on all sides. White and brown, Brahmins and Shudras, Muslims and Catholics, revolutionaries and Gandhians, Congressmen and beggars, journalists and above all, the most beautiful women in the world.

My skin might be a dozen shades of white higher than the fairest Bangla boy. My mother tongue might have twenty-six alphabets in its modern scripture but that does not take away the pride of being an integral part of this city.

The city of Calcutta.

Whenever I had a quarrel or an over instated judgment hanging around my neck or had my morale down, I would simply walk down the street across the race course to the little vendor who sold dairy sweets. Amongst them was my favorite, *mishti doi*; sweetened yoghurt, condensed and served in clay pot tumblers, and sweet enough to bring peace between the bitterest rivals. Sometimes I hoped suggesting our dear old Queen to sit down and have some blissful *mishti doi* instead of tea with the real Hitler to put an end to the catastrophic world war that seemed to reach no end at all.

Delicious, I wish I could just swim in a pool of *doi*.

Chapter 18

February 1942

Race Course, Calcutta

As I cornered myself in the alley behind the racecourse, dipping my fingers into the sweetmeat like a native aboriginal, I heard some loud swears from the other end of the alley. It kept growing and somehow it was not letting me enjoy my pot of *doi*. The yelling of male voices kept growing louder as if there was a procession of angry old men coming my way. The frustration forced me to turn and take note of the scene and as predicted, there were three aged men shouting at the top of their pharynx at a gathering of middle class Bangla folk. They were mere spectators and they clogged up in a circle as if surrounding the subject.

I walked over to Buron da, the vendor who sold those delicious sweet yoghurts. Aroused by curiosity I asked the obvious, ‘What is going on there, dada?’

Now, being a typical *Bangal* folk, Buron dada started by setting the betel leaf (that he had been chewing for ages) in the left-most corner of his mouth, which preceded the waving of the pitch of his throat. He had a round face, thick brown skin and a moustache rooted timidly in an upsurged area between his couched nose and bubbly lips; the ones that were tattered and dry for all the betel he had chewed till date. Finally, he spoke in his natively accented English, ‘*Thish bumon curshed,*’ he said and gulped a spit of betel juice and continued, ‘marry *hoshband* and *hoshband* dead. Now, she die, *jomp* in *phire*.’

I had always heard of this treacherous Indian ritual where the widowed wife would give up her life by jumping into the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, something so preposterous customized by male chauvinists of the past who inclined the ritual with some cynical story of an exaggerated mythology. They believed that such a ritual would result in the rebirth of the husband and wife in another life. I personally believe that superstitions have to be condemned and reincarnation must be restricted to the stories of mythology only. They should not be taken literally.

‘Are they going to burn the widow with her husband’s dead body?’ I asked.

‘*Hei.*’ Came an affirmative from Buronda.

‘Well, it is ridiculous! What age are we living in? I will not let this happen.’ I exclaimed. After slicing a coin into the vendor’s rugged hand I left for the scene of the crime that was about to be committed.

The crowd was getting aggressive with every step I took towards it like an unguided messiah of some American movie. However, I did not have a picture of the subject until now.

All I knew was that she was one unfortunate Bangla girl, a newly married wife who might have hardly stepped out of her confinements of virginity. I had this vague idea that that the girl was too young to commit the forced social suicide.

I was only a dozen meters away from the gathering when suddenly the crowd parted to reveal the sight that took my eyes by an air of the sweetest visual incense. Incense was my weakness, all right.

There she stood- the subject was young, slender, a worn-off face that had ounces of youth yet to be explored by a suitable suitor. A young girl, hardly eighteen, clad in a white *saree*, devoid of jewels and other items of frolic show-off that portrayed a woman as a showpiece on the window shelf of an antique shop. She looked down at the tarred road as if her fate was going down the drain and she was bidding a final goodbye. Her skin was mildly fair and smooth as silk. I guess she was the most beautiful girl that I had ever seen in my life, and surprisingly I was yet to see her eyes. I believe that the sublimity of a woman's eyes defined her beauty. I was desperately pleading against my conscience to be a little more patient before it jumped out of its confinement and pounced on the girl.

I was losing myself in her beauty and then somebody pulled me out, 'English Babu, what do you want?' The old man questioned in that same quivering voice that was yelling moments ago.

I realized that I was standing right in the middle of the gathering in front of the girl and everyone was surprised and bugged by the foreign parasite that was dressed in the dirtiest of whites. Obviously, my mother had not let me change or clean up after the game, thanks to her frustrating orders.

'Excuse me, I am talking to you.' The old man repeated, 'What are you doing here?'

'That is exactly what I wish to know. What are you doing here?' I asked boldly.

My question did not go well with the audience.

'It is none of your business English Babu, this is our family matter. Kindly leave before we *phorce* you.' Another man commanded in an aggravated tone, the labials hitting against each other every time they said '*f*'.

'Well I must remind you that your so called family matter is being dealt on a public road and I am part of the authority that rules this colonial region. How dare you command me to leave?' I threatened with a raised brow at the man. I turned back to the old man and continued, 'Who are you, Mister?'

'I am this girl's father in law. Her husband, that is my son, passed away.' He revealed.

'So, you are going to burn this innocent young girl because your son died an unexpected death?'

'This is our custom; a woman has no right to live once her husband passes away before having a child.' An old clergyman counseled.

'First of all, what are you still doing here, should not you be in your grave, oldie? Secondly, it is not her fault, why should she pay for her husband's death? Did she happen to

kill her husband or something?’ I kept looking at her every time I asked a question, just to get a glimpse of her eyes but to no success.

‘She is damned. They were not even married *phor* a year; she brought bad luck upon my son.’

‘I thought you Indians consulted *wonder men* called astrologers before fixing souls together. Did not you do all that mumbo-jumbo they tell you to perform?’ The question was a little paradoxical but then it struck me like a stone tinning on my knuckles, ‘Of course! The poor girl’s parents must have promised you lump sums of money and pots of gold in dowry. How could you say no to the lure of wealth? I believe you must have called this curse a *Laxmi* at that time.’

The old man was embarrassed to admit this bitter truth; he lowered his head and gazed at the road below in shame while some of the folk slipped into their houses. I knew I had won half the battle and all I cared at the moment was for the girl’s life. I was waiting to get a glimpse of her eyes.

‘Listen, this young girl has a right to live and none of you chauvinistic bollock-heads have the right to take it away from her. I am sure she can be accepted by her in-laws as a daughter.’

My suggestion followed silence of a momentary minute and then the old man spoke, ‘No, we cannot take the cursed girl back in our family.’

‘I am sure that the girl can go back to her parents then.’ I looked around for someone to take that spot, ‘Are her parents here amongst you?’

Silence was once again the answer from the crowd. The old man broke the silence, ‘The girl lost her mother at birth, and she was raised by her father and elder sister. Both of them died in a terrible accident right after her marriage last year.’

This revelation had touched down all the chords of sympathy in my heart for the girl, and for a moment I felt like taking her away from there into a rational matrimony with me. I looked at her with quenching eyes. She was still looking down, bidding goodbye to her fate. She should have known that her silence had become her greatest enemy. The enemy of every woman in a similar plight. The misery to be born in this old world country.

‘This girl is a source of misfortune for every one close to her. Cursed!’ The old man accused her once again, this time punching the words into her soul. Then came a voice that forced me to towards the source.

The girl said in a hushed tone, sulking ‘I am cursed, do you know why...’ The girl had spoken. Her voice was as sweet as the delicate drop of honey that hung at the corner of the comb right before the sun set its rays shining through the viscous liquid. I was mesmerized by the voice and then she lifted her face finally, looked at me, and spoke with the courage of a tested warrior, ‘...because I am a *woman*.’

The words came out like bullets from a rusty pistol but more than that it were her eyes that shot through my tangible self. Dark brown eyes, those that flaunted themselves like fish

in the endless ocean. I envied her dead husband for all the little time he had had to dive into the depths of those beautiful eyes. I stood there, forgetting everything else, looking into her eyes. There was rage in her eyes, and that quenched the thirst of my soul. She bore into the silence of my heart and I witnessed the sight of the eighth wonder of my world.

‘How dare you raise your voice to speak, wretched woman?’ her mother-in-law yelled.

‘Enough!’ I screamed in rage; I turned towards the old man and said, ‘If no one can give this girl a life, then I will!’ Oh yes, I had dared to say that. I made such a statement without even taking the girl’s consent. I had felt something in my heart and that gave me the courage to do so. Something I had never felt for anyone else before.

I was in love. Love at first sight.

I turned around, looked into the girl’s timid yet brave eyes ‘I would like to give you a life that you deserve. A life that these idiotic minds will be taking away from you. You do not have to love me or give me any material pleasure in exchange. All I wish is that the innocence in your soul, that shines those sparks of courage in your eyes, is not lost to the norms of this hypocritical society.’ I proposed. She looked at me. The rage in her eyes faded into a tainted confusion. I continued, ‘I understand the fact that you do not even know me. You might go by the color of my skin and risk of being enslaved to this white man for life, like your province. I will never do that, I give you my word over my mother. Nevertheless, if you do not come with me, these people will burn you with the effigy of your customs into ashes. So, I believe that my offer is a much better bargain than theirs.’

O dear, I had sworn on my mother. The old lady was a pain in the neck and I wondered how she would react when she learnt that her younger son was bringing home an *Indian widow* for a bride.

She did not speak, but she nodded her head up and down in affirmation. Tears filled down her beautiful eyes.

That was my first moment. I took the girl by her left hand and dashed out of the crowd. A couple of youngsters prepared to block our way, but the old man gestured them to make way. He said from behind in a lower tone, ‘Let him pay for what he did. She is the curse!’

I marched away as the crowd faded into the twilight. I kept moving ahead, leading the beautiful young widow. I was enraged, excited, and overjoyed. I could not believe what had happened in the previous moment. I fell in love with the girl ten minutes ago and I was taking her home with me now. I am perfectly sure that Shakespeare would have called this an act of *intimate love*.

Chapter 19

The Baxter Villa

My mother stared at me like a keeper from the crypt. I was yet to introduce my accomplice by name to my family that consisted of a skeptical mother, henpecked father and an over excited elder brother. To be honest, even I was yet to be acquainted with my companion's name. During my display of heroics earlier in the evening, I forgot to ask the beautiful girl's name. She stood behind me, hiding herself from the wrath of my mother's eyes.

'How dare you bring this Indian girl to my dressing room?' My mother shouted hysterically.

'I already told you everything. Which part did not you understand?' I shot back.

'The part where you mentioned that you wish to *give this poor soul a life* that it deserves. How do you plan on doing that, by breathing air into her lungs?'

'By marrying her.'

'Why?'

'Because I love her!' I declared.

'You do not even know this tramp! Do not be ridiculous. If there is any emotion it is sympathy, not love.' She forced it.

'And you expected me to marry girls from your tea parties? I never knew any of them either. I shall marry the girl that I love, for whom my heart shall sing a song.' I looked at the young woman behind me and said, 'My heart sings for her.'

My mother hit her palm on her forehead and conjured, 'Oh, for Christ's sake! , it must be a cacophony. This girl does not even deserve to be part of our family. How dare you compare her with those sophisticated English girls?'

'Give me one rational reason to support your claim.' I demanded.

'For starters, she belongs to a slave race. We are their masters and a woman from her race can be domesticated for cheap labor, and not a potential bride for an eligible bachelor like you.'

'I believe we are all humans and you do not have any right to disqualify a woman by religion or color.'

'Well then, she confides her faith in an absurd religion that has crossed its expiration date.' My mother put forth.

'I believe it is your narrow-minded thinking that has crossed its expiration date.' The talk of religion always brought out the worst in me, as I did not believe in any religion at all.

‘I hope you are able to convince your dear wife-to-be about that.’ My mother said sadistically, ‘because from now on, you do not belong to this family. I shall exclude you, rather banish you forever from this family... unless you make up your mind and set this new desire of yours on fire and marry a nice English girl of my choosing.’ She set her conditions with that nasty smile of victory on her wrinkled face.

If she was stubborn then I was as ardent as a steady mountain. My brother knew how this event would turn out, therefore he tried to step in to save the family from a disintegration of permanent nature.

‘Mother, I think we should not...’ he was interrupted by my mother.

‘You should probably keep yourself busy with your *itsie* plans to exchange vows with that sailor’s daughter. Defend your brother and I might change my mind. I do not mind ending up with no sons at all.’ She shot down my brother’s benevolent effort. What a clever move by her. I looked at my brother. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

I took a deep breath, felt the red hot air passing through my wind pipe and hitting the walls of the alveolar sac. I did not like farewells. I would keep it short. I moved towards my mother, stared into her grey tiring eyes that were filled with pride and snorted piercingly, ‘Good Riddance!’

She recoiled in shock and knocked her palms on the dressing table throwing down an expensive bottle of *parfum de toilette*. I did an about turn and took the girl’s left hand in mine and angrily rushed out of that demonic English house governed by my mother’s narrow-minded ethics and narcissistic ego. A powerless father and elder brother looked on as we dashed out of the front door.

I ended that chapter and it was time to start the next chapter of my life.

Chapter 20

The next day

Has it ever happened to you that the people with whom you take a leap are totally unknown to you? A complete stranger. Now, this is exactly what had happened to me. I was yet to know her name and then the moment came at the registrar's office when she was asked her name by the registrar.

The registrar was a corroded local man with thick framed soda glasses perched on his nose. He did not lift his face to look at any of us and was glued to the papers on his desk. He asked, 'The wife's name please?'

A momentary silence was followed by that very silky voice 'Lavanya Ghosh.'

There we go; her name was Lavanya or as natives would say 'Labonya'. Her name had a simple and metaphorical meaning- *grace*; a perfect name to describe this wonderful creation of the God that I did not believe. Graceful were her brown eyes, graceful were her thin lips, graceful were her silky voice and long black hair that scintillated right from the top of her head to her knees.

Her grace had caught hold of my heart the moment I had set my eyes on her. Hardly a day since then, now I was going to be her lawfully wedded husband. Yet I knew nothing about her but her name and the valor in her eyes.

Did she even like me or was it just gratitude?

Did she think that I was good looking or had she realized that I was indeed in love with her?

Did she like the blue of the sky or of the ocean?

Did she speak my language? Would she help me perfect hers?

Did she marry me because she had seen hope drawing into her life?

Did she trust me?

And above all, did she really carry a curse like that old man claimed?

One of my cricketing buddies, Leonard Briggs, ran a decent inn in the upper hub of the city. He was kind enough to lend me a good room for couple of weeks. I took his offer and moved in until I had a good job. I had grown up in my estate and had everything to my convenience. I never had had the chance or fortune of facing real life. I had lived in a house of mirrors, and all I could see was the richness inside it. I never had to work at an office, and the only profession I had had was that of a cricketer. It was a good one in fact. Do not forget I am still the captain of an unofficial English cricket team. However, since now I was on my

own with another soul depending on me I had to look for a pennyworth job in an office or start a business of my own. Cricket can fill a man's passion, but not his pocket. I wonder if cricket or any other sport could be made a full time profession, as I really do not see such a possibility in the next fifty years. The only way one can make a living out of a game like cricket is by fraudulence.

Getting a job in the public offices was easier for me as I was a man of white skin and from one of the best families living in the city. The last name was enough for that, but I wanted to shed that liable credibility and stand on my own feet. I wanted to create my own identity. Talking about identity, here I was yet to identify my wife.

I was standing on the balcony of the allotted room holding my precious pipe in the right hand, exhaling puffs of warm tobacco smoke into the misty night air of Calcutta. I heard the door behind me open and close. Upon turning around I found my wife standing in her new saree that I had bought for her. In that glimmering red saree she resembled Queen Kunti, who found a prominent mention in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharat*. Beneath that unforgettable face, a tempering grief swiveled. She was shy to speak for I was a stranger. She was holding something in her right hand.

Finally she spoke in that thin voice of hers,

'Aami jaani na aami ki korchhi, Thikk ya bhul. Kintu aami jaani k tumi eeshborer abotar. Aamaar jibon esechile aamaar jiboner shob durdosha dier korte, ar ishbor kakhono bhul korbe na.'

She paused to look at me. I had been totally mesmerized by the treble of her sound; however, I listened to each and every word carefully so that I did not miss out on anything.

'Go on, I am listening.' I added.

'Taai aami tomaake bharosha kori, aamaar ishborer ee moto. Aami shaara jibon tumaar sheba kor jabo.'

She held out her right hand and slowly opened her fist. She was holding a brand new minted coin. The light of the moon reflected off the surface of the silver half-rupee coin and the reflected ray formed a sparkle in her tender eyes.

She explained, 'you are my husband and it is our custom to begin a life of matrimony with the exchange of any auspicious entity, *shuvo mudro*. This is the symbol of luck and I have prayed to all the gods to bless the holder of this coin at all times. Please accept this,'

I took the coin from her reluctantly. I wondered if she had passed on some coin to her previous husband or maybe he might not have been carrying it. Had he been carrying it he would not have faced an untimely demise. More mumbo-jumbo, nevertheless, I did not wish to disrespect the beautiful young woman's first gift to her new husband. She kneeled down and touched my feet, 'Bless me, my Lord.'

I quickly withdrew my foot and brought her up with my hands. The pipe dropped down on the floor in this process.

I saw sincere tears of gratitude in her eyes and I knew I still had to win her heart. I was not wrong in choosing my soul mate for what she said was something that every man strived and yearned to hear from his woman. I pulled her to me and opened my arms around in embracement. She gave a satisfied sigh of relief and surrendered herself completely.

What she had said in her mother tongue was a woman's pledge that meant:

I have no idea of what I am doing, right or wrong. But all I know is that you are the incarnation of God who came to save me from my miserable life. Moreover, God can never be wrong, so I place trust in you as my God and wish to serve you forever.

Chapter 21

1946

Years passed like a baby's nights in a cradle that rocked itself to a song of the seasons and we grew fonder of each other with each switch in season. I learnt her language and she learnt mine. There were talks about Mr. Attlee granting complete independence to the unformed Indian republic. Most of my fellow Englishmen had already left for their motherland but India was my home and I could never think of leaving this place.

My life as well as my wife was Indian. Together, we had lived four years of complete attachment and never had we been happier in our lives before. However, the only shortcoming was that we did not have a baby as of yet. Lavanya and I could not make a baby. We tried every hook in the book to this little thorn in the flesh; medicines, yoga, tantra, mantra (that was her, for me it was all mumbo-jumbo). Maybe that was our fate. But we were happy because we had each other and did not have to share our love with a third one. I asked her to restart her college studies which she had given up after her previous marriage. She was a student of fine arts, she even taught little kids to paint.

I had joined the civil services and work was really going well. The Second World War finally ended last year. Peace restored to chaos. As for cricket, I was losing my touch in the game and I was more into work now. My new passion was my wife and I did not regret sacrificing cricket for her.

One fine morning somebody showed up at my workplace, someone from my past. I had not heard from him in these four years. I never blamed him, for he did not want to lose the girl he loved, so chose to abide by my mother's blackmail. Even I would have done the same, had I been in his place. His wife did send me postcards occasionally. They had taken to the rumors of India's independence, so our mother had sold off everything and returned to England with everyone else right after the war ended. It had been a year since then.

My brother was standing at the reception of the secretariat where I was visiting that day, waiting for me in a dark blazer and a pair of creased trousers. It was Winston and he had not changed an inch in these four years.

We greeted each other; there was an unusual formality in our casual exchange of pleasantries. I requested him to take a seat. He formally informed me that they had settled down in London in 1945 and were doing well. He came right to the point after a few minutes of *catching up*.

'Brother, I have some news.' He frothed.

'Good or bad?' I asked.

‘Well, it is for you to decide. Our mother...’ he sighed and continued, ‘...has not been keeping well. Her condition is worsening as we speak.’

The news shook me. I always wanted to get rid of that old woman, but never realized that wish when granted would leave me in shock. I could not decide if it was good news or bad.

‘I understand if you do not wish to say anything, you have absolutely justified reasons. I respect that. However,’ he locked his gaze on me, ‘mother has written down her will that, surprisingly, includes your wife as well.’

That was the second shocker.

He continued, ‘Maybe it was driven by guilt, but she had taken everyone by surprise. We all knew that she was very strong willed. She had everything in her name right after she got married to father. She has left the entire property and money to her two daughter-in-laws. I had written a letter informing you about her ill-health and had also sent a telegram, but seems like you did not receive them yet.’

‘Brother, I do not know how to react to such news but I am sorry, I cannot accept this, neither shall my wife.’ I clarified.

‘But... but... Richard, she really misses you.’

‘I doubt that. She had been very unjust to my wife and me. She had herself thrown us out of *your* family.’

‘*Our* family...’ He corrected.

‘No, my family is limited to my wife and me. I reject her offer on behalf of my wife, you may have her share.’ I declared.

‘At least visit her one last time. She really wants to see you. Do not take the property, but give her a last visit for Gods’ sake.’ My brother started pleading, ‘At least for my sake, Richie. Please!’

I could not bear to see my brother beg in front of me. He had always been the one who supported me back until I left that family.

‘I will be there next week. Please make it clear to her that I shall come alone, my wife cannot travel as she is not well.’ I set my conditions.

‘Very well, thank you, Richard.’ He smiled.

Later that day I took him home and introduced him to my wife formally. We had a short get together. He left the next morning.

As promised I left for London the following week. I had never been to London before; in fact, I had never been to any place outside Calcutta. I had visited Madras a couple of years back as part of my job but that was it. I wanted to travel the length and breadth of India and the urge had started growing in me over the years. I arrived on the day my mother passed away, alas; she could not see me before dying. Maybe that was her destiny. A rational man does not believe in destiny, but I was vulnerable.

After her funeral, I wrote off everything to my sister-in-law on behalf of my wife and started back for India. There were some non-transferable entities in her will, which I could not dispose. My brother insisted on keeping that with us to invest in some property or charity.

That little amount was worth a fortune itself. I had written about this to my wife and was yet to find a way to make good use of the fortune that my mother left us.

I could not get a flight owing to the non-availability of tickets due to the pre-independence rig in the Indian subcontinent. Everybody was coming back to England before they were thrown out. The English lived for pride. So, I took a vessel to India.

There was a growing restlessness inside me. I felt guilty about my mother, and for not being able to make it in time. I condemned my arrogant ego. Once again, she had forced her authority over me, this time in the form of a fortune. I had to let it go and had to find a way to do that. I knew if I went back to Calcutta, the memories of my mother would haunt me. That was when I saw an advertisement outside the bar in the vessel. It showed a dozen travel destinations in the Indian subcontinent. The poster had a gold coin at the center and there was a caption from the company, it read:

DISCOVER YOUR DESTINY.

What is destiny for a man who merely gives in to his fantasies? Destination was something I was looking for but was it worth all the hype? Can a trip to twelve different exotic locations be decisive enough to use such strong word as destiny? While on the other hand, a trip was perfect to distract me from my guilt. I stood there looking at the poster.

‘Very irresistible, isn’t it?’ said a voice from behind.

I turned around and found a middle-aged man dressed up in saffron attire like a sage. There was a sense of mighty knowledge in his eyes and his smile carried ounces of positivity.

‘I do not know.’ I replied.

‘What holds you back?’ the man asked.

‘The agony of making a choice.. On one hand, I want to take my mind off things that are hurting me. And on the other hand, I am not sure if I can dispose my duties as a husband or a citizen and run away for an adventure just to overcome my inner fear.’

‘Dear young man, sometimes you have to lose yourself in order to find yourself.’ The sage smiled with the wisdom of the ancient Vedic sciences.

‘But what if I end up losing everything I have and find nothing.’ I presented my dilemma.

‘Well, toss a coin then. Let your fate be decided by...’ he breathed out, ‘fate!’ The holy man started walking away into the prayer room.

Of course, a coin! That is exactly what I had with me. The coin that my wife had presented me on that moonlit first night of our marriage, ‘*This is the symbol of luck and I have prayed to all the gods to bless the holder of this coin at all times*’, she had said. For the first time in my life, I was going to let something as absurd and uncertain as fate to make a decision for me. I needed solid luck.

I ran back to my room, pulled out my attaché from under my bed, and opened it. I juggled through the miscellanea that I was carrying with me and there it was neatly rested under my Wednesday blazer; a bright silver coin that carried the head of King Martin on one side and floral tapestry on the other. It was a half-rupee coin. Nothing special about that piece from a mintage of millions, yet it was the only one chosen by my beloved wife. I closed my eyes and held the coin close to my heart.

“I must be utterly foolish to do this, but I believe a man’s guilt drives him insane and this is one of the early symptoms of the same. Guilt has made me so vulnerable and weak that I am about to succumb to chance.” I opened my eyes and looked at the coin. It was the head side, ‘Heads and I keep my principle and duties and go back to Calcutta, lead a normal life, squandered by guilt until it kills away itself or kills me.’

I flipped the coin onto my left hand’s palm; the back had one of the most amusing floral carvings. It had four concentric circles; three of them were at close proximity while the fourth one was half the diameter of the third one. Engraved inside the circumference of the fourth circle in bold face was,

HALF

RUPEE

INDIA

‘Face and I choose to go back to my city and lead the rest of my life in an ocean of guilt..’ I told myself.

It was time to make the toss. The toss of fate. It is funny for a rational man like myself to toss my fate this way, yet I was about to do it.

I coiled the fingers of my right hand into an upright fist, holding them loosely. I placed my thumb gently on the edge of the index finger and slid the coin on top of the pit formed by the tip of my thumb and the middle of the index finger. Then I tossed the coin and off it went in the air, swiveling. I breathed in and out in long sighs. Upon hitting the point of saturation, it started its descent and I caught the coin in midflight between my palms. I closed my eyes and slowly removed my left hand’s palm from over the other one.

I opened my eyes slowly and saw the side of the coin that decided my fate.

Yes, I had to discover my destiny, I had decided that very instant that I would go to each of the twelve destinations displayed in the poster. It was a charade to drown my sudden gush of guilt. A charade to follow uncertainty.

An uncertainty called Destiny.

It had been tail.

Chapter 22

Vypeen Island, Travancore-Kochi

9th December, 1947

After having my guilt and fate intertwined by the toss of a coin, I had travelled the length and breadth of India; from the highest peaks of the Hindu Kush in the north to the deepest valleys of the north east; the desert in the west to the plateau in the southeast. However, I was yet to make a fateful encounter with destiny. I had left my wife in charge of our home. I took a short interval at Calcutta and stayed there in the autumn of 1947 with her. I fell in love with my wife a couple of times again and that made me almost discontinue my crazy journey. The old opera houses and the tramlines only brought back memories of my mother. I was not strong enough to survive the guilt, for I believed that the aroma of my final destination lingered close by. The aroma from a city I had never touched in reality, but had conceived in the deepest of my dreams. The only place I had not visited from the list of destinations was the city of Cochin in the south west coast of the Indian subcontinent. I knew I had to visit the Queen of the Arabian Sea before deciding to settle down. In December I made my way southward.

By the time I arrived in Cochin, the world was preparing to welcome the year 1948 and the city was under the Travancore-Cochin or Thiru-Kochi as the locals called it. There were talks about inclusion of the northern region of Malabar into the current state of Thiru-Kochi based on the common language spoken in these areas; Malayalam. I travelled throughout the entirety of Travancore, Kochi, Malabar, South Canara and Coorg.

One day, I was walking, with my silken umbrella over my head and the same half rupee coin (that had directing my fate) jingling inside my fist, on the sands of the Island of Vypeen, when I realized I had hit a dead-end. There was just the sea ahead, and the emptiness of the horizon beyond. For a moment, I felt dizzy. The smell of the sea punched me in the center of my nose and butterflies hit the walls of my stomach.

This is the end of the land, but my quest yet unfinished. I thought, closed my eyes and sighed. Suddenly I felt the lingering aroma again which slowly transformed into an orphic Gregorian chant. I slipped the coin inside my trousers' pocket and was forced to turn left and slowly opened my eyes to be mesmerized by what I saw.

A decaying mansion stood at the edge of the shore, enthroned on the top of a great cliff, with the violent depth of the sea right below. He heard church bells ring to the tune of the hour and breeze from the sea calling his to the mansion. The view itself was a splendid portrait: the sun at the top left of the picture with a bed of clear blue and mildly quivering water under the line of the horizon, while on the left stood the great mansion. A Victorian building coupled with a traditional Chera architecture in holy matrimony on the edge of a thick brown cliff. A captivating sight which any artist would love to replicate on her canvas, a

frame so enigmatic which every photographer would dream of capturing in her camera. A visual so pompous that it filled the mind with a million words of praise yet left the man speechless.

It was time to decide. I curled up my fingers once again, placed the coin on the spot, and tossed it in the air. I would leave the place and go back to Kolkata if it was Heads and Tails would make me stay there forever. In all the previous destinations, the coin had turned up *Heads*, thus, stretching my journey to this ultimate destination on that list. However, this would be the last time I would be tossing the coin.

The final decision; never again would I depend on a coin and put my life on the lines of fate. I had always been a rational man and would continue being so, excusing myself from this small episode in life. I was afraid to go back to Calcutta, as I knew I might punish myself under an infinite spell of guilt. Change is what my soul requested and I hoped the coin would give me the necessary change this time.

I let the coin drop on the sand.

The coin had decided; it was tails. I had made my mind. This mansion on the tip of Fort Cochin was my final destination.

My quest is over. I prepared for the arrival at the destination.

The Clifford Mansion I shall call it.

Chapter 23

It was afternoon and the sun did not show any mercy on my tanned skin. I walked around the deserted beach. I found a small teashop in the corner of the yard, there was just one customer and then the owner of the tea-stall, a veteran of native origin. Upon seeing me approaching him, the veteran tea-stall owner welcomed me with the widest grin ever seen on the shores of Cochin. He muttered something in the native language. I could not understand what they said for I had no knowledge of Malayalam. Some words were vaguely similar to the Dravidian language of Tamil. I had spent some time in the Madras Presidency couple of years back. Therefore, I spoke Tamil quite well.

‘*Chaaya Edukette?*’ The veteran asked him in Malayalam.

‘Yes please.’ The word was same in Tamil and Hindi, *Chaaya* meant tea and I could surely make use of the tea to strike a conversation with the native.

‘*Saaippu Englandil ninnaano?*’ The native asked with the same wide smile.

I looked around, the other customer was eagerly waiting for my reply as well and smiled at me instantly, exposing his bright white teeth. I forced a smile.

‘I... I don’t understand. *Yenna sollarathu?*’ I tried asking in an uncanny British variant of what I thought was Tamil, hoping that the native would be able to understand.

‘You...’ He said pointing at Richard’s chest, ‘England?’

‘Oh Yes. I am.’ I replied instantly.

‘You kill India? We *Simon go back* you.’ The tea-seller chuckled. Beneath the chuckles lay an innocent warning of what they would do in case the white man showed his true color again. The mutiny and freedom struggle were still fresh in their minds. Although it had happened way up in the north, even the natives of the southernmost tip were well aware of the slogan.

‘No...no... I want to buy that house, up there on the cliff.’ I declared pointing my walking cane towards the picturesque frame.

Suddenly, an expression of pity and uncapped fear grew on the tea-seller’s face.

‘*Ithu pretha kottaaramaanu... Venda Saaiyippe.* Buy... no...no!’ He said.

‘Yes... yes... I want to buy it.’ I spoke without recognizing any word other than ‘buy’.

‘*Pretham... Bhootham* in house!’ He tried to make me understand.

‘Yes, the house. Who is the owner?’

‘*Ownera?*’

‘Yes... yes... the owner, where can I find him?’ I was delighted to see recognition in the native’s tone.

‘Owner dead. He no come.’ The tea-seller slackened the porous cotton cloth that was adorning his hip, ‘You *talkku Saami, Broker Saami.*’ The sun shone its brightest ray on his balding head.

‘Sammy?’ I reconfirmed.

‘*Saami. Go Tripunithara, Saami thanthri* in big Vishnu temple.’ The native spoke each word distinctly as if he were teaching a three year old the first words of her life.

‘You mean, *Saami* is a priest in the big Vishnu temple in *Tri... Tripunithara?*’

‘Yes!’ The tea-seller smiled, but it was short lived as an expression of grim terror replaced that smile again. He moved towards me as I placed the hat back on my head, preparing to leave, and warned ‘*Avide Duratmaavinde nivaasam undu.* The house is haunted by a visitor... *the frequent visitor...*’

Chapter 24

Shree Poornathreyeesha Temple, Tripunithara
10th December, 1947

I arrived an hour before the scheduled meeting time at the outer sanctum of the great temple of Lord Poornathreyeeswara. After running brisk enquiries with the locals at Fort Cochin, I had learnt that the mansion had been abandoned for a long time. However it had a caretaker in the royal town of Tripunithara, a Hindu priest by the name of Krishnamurthy, locally known to everyone as Broker Saami. I looked around, the place was beautiful and the air was piously diluted by the aroma of sandal flavored incense sticks and camphor.

The smell of Hinduism, I thought. I loved the smell coming from temples. As a kid I would wake up early in the morning just to attend the early morning *aarti* at a Shakti temple across the street. I would wait outside the temple until the smell of the incense and camphor was completely toppled by that of motor vehicles.

I got the *shuvo* coin out from my breast pocket and looked at it,

‘I must be one crazy young man’, I thought and smirked.

I started drawing elliptical figures with my fingertip on the carved surface of the coin. I saw a pair of naked feet stepping into my line of sight. I slowly looked up at the face of the new entrant. It was a bumpy face with spots of oil pits and thickly furnished by a tanned complexion, typical to the tropical sun. The forehead coiffed with a thick vertical stroke of the *Gopichandana* and hair trimmed to what was just short of an inch. Two small eyes and a blunt nose placed themselves firmly on the disproportionately smaller face as compared to his body which had nothing on the upper half but a white silk shawl lined by a golden stroke for a border covering the chest over the shoulders. His face and body had little hair and the abdomen was unusually flat for the particular kind of people from this region. He was a Brahmin, a Vaishnava; something that the vertical stroke of holy clay called *Gopichandana* symbolized.

‘*Bhavanti Namrāstaravah falodgameh navāmbubhirbhūrivimbino ghanāh.*’ The Brahmin chanted into my sober eyes, ‘I am Padmanābha Krishnamurthy. How can this humble servant of God serve your highness?’

‘Oh dear, I must correct you, I do not belong to the royal family. Not even the farthest of my kinsmen. I am an ordinary citizen of this great country and the name is Baxter... Richard Clifford Baxter. How do you do, His Holiness?’ I introduced myself in the most humbling manner.

‘You win my heart with your humility and that elates me. I am not well accustomed to the British way of conversational formalities. Kindly pardon me for that.’ There was the thick Malayalee accent to the priest’s English, especially in the silence of ‘h’s and coagulation of ‘l’s; typical to people from the region.

‘Oh, that is not a problem at all. I respect your efforts to talk to me in such grammatically sound English. In fact, earlier I was a little worried if we could even get into a conversation without making ape-like gestures, but seems that you are well versed not only in Sanskrit but English as well.’ I burst into a light gag.

‘I speak a dozen languages, you see. English is just one of them.’

‘Enough for me, I believe. However, that person from the port told me your name was something else. Something *Sam... Sammy*.’ I presented my doubt to the priest who was waving to his assistant to leave the inner sanctum.

The priest was disgusted upon hearing my doubt ‘Oh! Those silly low caste folk! They have given a really unwanted nickname to me because they cannot get my name right. You see they don’t clean their tongues so they can’t pronounce my name.’

‘I clean my tongue, but I think that I can ever pronounce your name correctly either.’ I joked.

‘You see, us Brahmins are the men of God. We are the only ones authorized to perform any form of pious duty or ceremony.’ He boasted.

‘And who authorizes this authority?’ I asked sarcastically.

‘You belong to a false religion so you are not qualified to receive the answer.’ The priest frowned.

I giggled within myself at the priest’s narrow-minded beliefs. I had always been a rational person, and placed religion on the backseat of my carriage. To me, religion and rituals were nothing but what I said before- mumbo-jumbo. The only time I chose an irrational path was when I decided to rest my life on a coin penned by my wife as a *shuvo mudro* or lucky coin. I was yet to surrender to this joke created around God and different religions, however, I chose to avoid an argument with the indoctrinate man of God, ‘I am afraid I was born with that.’ I said and smiled.

‘So, we are initiated men. We follow the ancient principles of the Vedas. We are called *swami* or the masters.’

‘I am sorry to interrupt, but is that like an educational denomination? Like Masters in some field of science?’

‘The mastery over one’s own self, the body and soul and its habitual patterns. We have forfeited *everything* to walk in the path of God.’

‘Do you have a family?’ I asked.

‘Yes, one wife, and *eleven* children.’ The Brahmin announced proudly.

‘There goes your ‘everything’. I am not sure about forfeiting everything for God, but you do have ‘everything’ to build your own team for cricket.’ I cracked out laughing.

‘I find your jokes very rude, Mr. Baxter.’

‘I find your beliefs very crude. How long are you planning to claim yourself superior over others? All of you belong to the same religion yet you are divided. I pity your beliefs. I pity every religious belief.’ I declared.

‘So, you are saying you do not believe in God?’ The priest said shocked.

‘All I am saying is that I believe in myself.’ I corrected him.

‘*Aham Brahmāsmi.*’

‘I am sorry? I do not understand Sanskrit.’

‘I am God.’

‘O Really? Which one?’ I asked.

‘No! No! I am telling you the meaning of *Aham Brahmāsmi*. It means *I am God*. It is a principle in Vedas, the *Aghoris* follow this.’

‘By the way, which god do you represent, *Swami*?’

‘I represent the Supreme God,’ the priest closed his eyes and went into a short trance and chanted the name of His God, ‘*Hari!*’

‘Oh! The priest from the temple on the west said it was *Shiva*.’

‘*Shiva* is just secondary to *Hari*. Now before you steam me off with anger, I would like to get down to business with you. Why did you want to see me? And the people here now call me *Broker Saami* because I deal in a little land and matchmaking for the upper caste. They can’t even pronounce it right. *Swami* has become *Saami*, Illiterate idiots!’ Saami spat.

‘Well now you have a new variation, I can only call you *Broker Sammy* no matter how hard I try.’

‘I have no choice. Although, it sounds much better than *Saami*.’

‘Fair enough. I wish to buy...’ I took a deep breath and spoke ‘the old mansion on the cliff.’

‘But I must warn you, it’s a secluded mansion, old enough to house ghosts of a century.’ *Saami* warned Richard.

‘I don’t believe in ghosts, Sammy!’ I clarified.

‘They talk about a visitor... the one who haunts the mansion...’ The worried Saami spoke the next few words in a hushed tone, ‘Beware of *that frequent visitor*...’

‘Have you seen him... this visitor gentleman?’ I asked chuckling.

My chuckle did not go well with the priest. He implied, ‘I have not seen God, but He is there.’

‘Oh, I absolutely forgot that. I am pretty sure there must be some rational explanation behind the so called *visits of the visitor*.’ I pushed some air out of my lungs and continued, ‘Well, I wish to buy that mansion or at least rent it for some time. I am awfully attracted to the magic of that place. I will tell something that I have not even told my wife.’

‘Go ahead. I am listening.’ The priest assured.

‘I loved an Indian widow, married her and my mother ousted me out of her house four years ago. Since then I never maintained any relationship with my family. Last year my mother passed away, I could not even let her see me before dying; she left half of her fortune to my wife despite all the hatred and ego. I could not forgive myself. I wanted to get rid of my guilt. My wife had given me this coin, she said it is *shuvo mudro*,’ I showed him the half-rupee coin that my wife had given me and continued,

‘A coin that shall save me from ill-fate. Then I tossed a coin to choose if I should return to normal life and reel under the guilt or take up an exceptional adventure across the length and breadth of *Bhaarata* to see if my fate leads me to an ultimate destination. Now, after travelling for over a year I come to a final point where I see this beautiful mansion at the edge of a cliff and I felt for the first time in my life that this is my destination. Once again, I let the coin decide my fate. Dear *Sammy*, I am not a man of God, I am too little to be that, but for one time in my life, I would like to believe in that thing called destiny. I got a feeling the moment I set my eyes on that mansion and the coin confirmed that’

Saami was listening carefully. He shrugged his shoulders and said ‘I see you falling into the trap of your own destiny.’

‘I would not know until and unless I stand there, if it’s a trap or a ladder.’

‘Of course, it is an old and secluded place. You cannot live there with your wife. It might be too dangerous. It is not a good place for women especially. Even if we suppose that there is no ghost like you say, but still, is it safe for a young man as yourself and your wife to stay up there, all alone?’ Saami said with the concern of an elder brother.

‘In that case, I wish to rent the place first. If it is safe, I shall buy it from you later. How does it sound?’ I proposed.

‘You see Mr. Baxter, I am a broker, and it is always good to get my things sold because that is how I get the money. But I do not want to put your lives at risk by misleading you.’ He said.

‘You did not mislead me. You told me the truth the way you know it. Now I still wish to buy it. I take responsibility.’ I assured him.

It was getting unusually cloudy that day, and the sound of thunder could be heard in the distance. Saami sensed an incoming shower. He quickly picked up a thawed umbrella from the shoe keeper’s room. He came back to the spot with the umbrella that was already open.

‘It will start raining heavily anytime now. I think we should call it a day. I shall speak to the owner of the house and get back to you with the rents and formalities at the earliest.’

‘That would be perfect. I shall await your word. But how long should I wait?’ I asked.

‘The owner is the great grandsire of the royal family. Ananthapadmanabha Varma lives in this town itself, however, he has gone to visit his sister-in-law who is married into the royal family of Travancore. He shall be here next week. So give me at least a week.’

‘I shall see you here next week. Goodbye Sammy.’

I took my leave and went my way. I had a long list to prepare.

Chapter 25

19th December 1947

As agreed, Sammy came back with some good news the following week. The owner had agreed upon renting the house on the sole condition that the tenant should take responsibility of any mishap. This was to be signed on paper along with the other formalities. The man was not a greedy property owner as it seemed from his gesture. He did not ask for any rent at all, as he was sure that I would not live there for more than a week. The last tenant had run off on his first night itself. If I managed to live there for a month had I had to pay the month's rent, which was fair enough.

I wrote to my beloved that it was time to pack her bags and get in a train to Madras. I had already asked my friend to arrange for the ticket in Calcutta. I went to Madras, picked her up, and we boarded a train to Kochi. That was the plan. But little did we know that destiny had a slightly different plan for us.

Chapter 26

Clifford Mansion *26th December 1947*

Winter in the tropical region of the country was less chilly, just like Calcutta; one could take a dip in the tub ten times yet come out without freezing. We had the mansion for ourselves. Lavanya loved the mansion. She loved and accepted everything that I loved, and that was the reason why she was so special. I had been missing her for a long time, but now she was with me again. During daytime, a fisherman's wife came to help with the cleaning of the mansion. It was huge and old and needed a lot of looking after. She always left before sunset for she feared the wrath of the *visitor*. Her mouth never ran out of tales and rumors about the legend of the land.

We had spent two days and two nights in the mansion but we were yet to hear from the *Visitor*. On the third day the maid seemed pretty tense and clumsy in her duties. I was very intrigued to know the reason and I was sure it had something to do with the legendary Mr. Visitor. I put down the book that I had started to read and looked at the maid. She was toiling the sweeping pad off and forth on a perfectly clean floor.

'Chinnama,' that was her name, 'If you sweep any longer, you might rub off the floor itself. Is there something bothering you today?' I asked.

She gave me a tense look. The very next moment we heard a knock on the door followed by summons of 'Mr. Baxter, are you home?'

I recognized the voice immediately. It was Broker Saami.

I opened the door and welcomed him, 'Please come in, Sammy.'

'Thank you Mr. Baxter. I hope you are doing well.' He said while stepping inside. He was bare-chested, with just a piece of white silk on his shoulders.

'We have had a pleasant stay, no ill-wills whatsoever.' I said confidently.

'Well of course, I see that you have succeeded to pass the first two days. But there is something about the visitor that I wished to tell you. So, I came all the way.'

I sensed another warning from his tone. I asked, 'and that would be?'

'I have not been able to sleep for the past one week because...'

‘...Of the mosquitoes? I know, they have been taking my sleep away too.’ I interrupted him and chuckled.

‘That was not funny, Mr. Baxter. Ever since the day I met you, I have been getting *duswapnas*.’ He shivered as he said.

‘*Duswapnas*?’

‘Yes, bad dreams you see. Moreover, since the day you moved in here, the dreams have gotten worse and I have not slept for three days. I think I see him, you and your wife. These are all omen, signs of something bad, something which you do not believe in, of course.’ He was already sweating in the heat.

I asked Chinamma to bring a cool cup of buttermilk for the exhausted priest. On her way to the kitchen, she stumbled and fell on the floor. The fall was a light one. Embarrassed, she got up and moved into the kitchen.

‘I do not know why this woman is behaving so clumsily today. She has been falling and breaking things since morning.’ I accused.

‘Of course, she will. After all, tonight is the night of *pournami*- full moon.’ He hissed like a serpent.

‘So?’

‘This is the night of the visitor.’

‘Oh Sammy, dear old Sammy! Why do you keep telling me such annoying stories?’ I exclaimed.

Lavanya had heard a foreign voice in conversation with me, so she came down to see who it was. I introduced her to the priest and she joined us. The maid brought the buttermilk and each of us took a tumbler full of the cool drink..

‘You were telling?’ I asked the priest.

‘The legend goes like this...

Chapter 27

‘The mansion was built in the summer of 1920 by the great grandfather of His Highness as a wedding gift for his only daughter Sreevidya Devi. However, this did not go down well with his stepson Mrityunjaya. There was a rumor that Mrityunjaya had an affair with a woman belonging to the Nair clan. The rumor turned everyone in the family against him. His father ousted him out of the family.

The grand wedding took place in this very mansion and all the royal and holy ones of the land attended it. There was an assembly of forty-eight elephants right outside this door. However, Mrityunjaya was excluded from the grand affair. The marriage took place and the couple was to spend their *aadhya raatri* or the ceremonious first night here. All the close family members and friends were staying back in the mansion that night. The night was breezy and the moon was full. When the next day dawned upon the mansion, nobody woke up. There was absolute silence. The townsmen grew suspicious of that silence and a few reached the mansion. They found a hundred and eight sleeping bodies; bodies that would never wake up again; they had all slept to death. Each and every member of the family was dead including the bride, groom as well as His Highness. No heir left alive except for Mrityunjaya, who did not die because he did not attend the wedding. All eyes were on Mrityunjaya, for he had motive to kill them. However, there was no proof. Someone had poisoned the entire family.

How? Who? When? What? Nobody knew. Mrityunjaya was the only legal heir left. He inherited everything. He married a girl from the royal family of Tripunithara shortly after the inheritance. He had always been a pathetic human being who craved for money, intoxication, and women. He sold off most of the property in the city for money that he used for gambling. He would come here every night when there was a full moon with a woman of his choice and would rape the life out of her. Some survived, most did not and they were thrown into the sea.

Mrityunjaya had two sons, one from his wife and the other from one of the women who had survived his exploits of one moonlit night. The woman left the newborn baby at the doorstep of the mansion and jumped into the sea. This illegitimate son was born when Mrityunjaya was thirty six. Although, he had started hating everyone by that time, he developed a soft corner for this little baby. The psychotic man raised him amidst his fancy exploitations of desire. He grew up here witnessing the lunatics of his father. The boy became a social outcast. Upon learning that that he had a stepbrother, Mrityunjaya’s elder son, Chandrasena, came to the mansion with sentries to take custody of the young one. However, upon arriving they found two dead bodies; one that of a naked Mrityunjaya and the other of some woman who was half-naked and on top of the dead man. The illegitimate son was

found in his room attempting to hang himself from a rope. The sentries came in at the right time, they stopped him. The elder son took charge of the illegitimate son and took him home. The elder son had been married to the princess of Thiruparayur and had a son who was the same age as this illegitimate son. Therefore, he raised this stepbrother like his own son and gave him proper education and a life that a boy deserved. Since that day, nobody ever came back to this mansion. It was locked forever.' the priest stopped and took a sip of his buttermilk.

'Just because some crazy old man lived and died here does not mean that...' I wanted to reason but I was interrupted by the priest.

'... However,' he licked his upper lip and cleared off the cream that had settled on the surface and spoke, 'two years back, the people of the shore saw some light from the upper window on a full moon's night. Some claimed that they had heard shrieks and moaning of a woman. However, nobody had the courage to go up there and check. But the next day, the fishermen found a floating dead body of a naked woman in the sea. A woman who was never seen in this region before. Since then there have been over twenty instances of a light in the house, one every full moon of the month, and six dead bodies have been found in the sea. The dead bodies were found exactly after the night of *Pournami*. Tonight is *Pournami*. Nevertheless, we have not witnessed any encounters in the past six months, so some believe that the visitor has gone back to hell.' He ended his story.

'You never told me about the dead bodies.' I accused. I glanced at Lavanya. She was tense and pale with horror.

'I had warned you about the visitor.' Saami defended himself.

'Yes, you said there was some ghost! But you never told me about the recent happenings.'

'I warned you that the ghost visits the place. You never listened, you kept mocking at me.' He cried.

'But why do these ignorant people warn outsiders to stay away?' I asked as I had been told by quite a few people I met last week in the town.

'That is because Mrityunjaya only brought women from foreign soil. He never brought women from Kochi. Most of the women were from Kovai, Mysore or Malabar. Outsiders they all were! Mrityunjaya hated the natives so much that he only brought outsiders for pleasure and pain.'

I asked Lavanya to retire as I did not want her to burden herself with such stories. After she left with the maid, I showed Saami the way to the door.

'If you want, you can stay at my house tonight in the town. At least you can skip this night of *Pournami*.' Saami offered. His eyes were red filled with tears of regret and horror.

‘That would not be necessary Sammy, I do not believe in such legends. The man is dead. As for the dead bodies, they might have belonged to some tourists or ignorant souls who slipped from the cliff at night, or of people who committed suicide. It is also scientifically believed and proven that the sea carries bodies, dead and alive, across continents, so those bodies may have been carried by the sea from some distant shores. Just think empirically. And in case if there is some killer here, I can take care of him. I do have a gun, not as rusty as my fingers, but yes I know how to use it well.’ I reasoned and smiled confidently.

‘But Mr. Baxter...’

‘Good evening Sammy.’ I said and shut the door on the poor Brahmin. I heard him chant some *mantras* in Sanskrit and fade away into the distance. If anything had to happen, it would and I was ready to deal with it.

Chapter 28

Later that night

The night was rather eerie. The full moon thickly covered by evil clouds and the sound of thunder occasionally bolted in chorus with the howling of *Chennaya*. It would be raining soon. Lavanya had gone off to sleep early. She had been upset after hearing the story from the priest earlier that day. I enjoyed it as a story, for it was a perfect plot for some *Hitchcockian* suspense thriller but too absurd to be true. In fact, reality was the most rational case of the absurd. Talking about absurdity, I was about to read this highly talked about book by a French chap called Albert Camus. The French write weird things that the English world cannot understand or appreciate. I had picked up the English translation of the book from London. I had heard a lot about it; praise and criticism from the same mouths, and I wanted to experience the story of *the stranger*. I took the book and a lantern into the study room after a solitary dinner. I placed the lit lantern alongside the book on the reading table and sat on the wooden chair. After adjusting the intensity of the light, I put my right hand into my breast pocket and brought the shining half rupee coin out and examined its surface under the incandescent light of the lantern. I thought about the visitor's story and how I had placed myself in the lap of that legend, all because I let my life follow the toss of a coin. I sighed and placed the coin on the table. I opened the book and started reading.

Suddenly I heard the sound of glass shattering and it came from the staircase. I got off from my chair, picked up the lantern with my right hand and started walking towards the staircase. I must have looked like a maiden in distress. I was curious, not scared of course. The mansion had two staircases, one was a typical spiral one that led to the terrace and the other one was a closed compartment that led to the cellar. The sound came from the one that went down to the cellar. I was presuming some valid explanation for the same. But the continuous thundering did raise the hair on my arms. The staircase commenced beneath the wooden floor that was just half a dozen steps to the right of my reading table. There was a square tile that had to be pulled in order to open this passage. The tile had a small handle and a high tensile bronze bolt that locked it from outside. I unbolted it and I pulled it open. It was pitch black below and smelled like pungent vinegar. There was a distinct buzzing sound. I sneaked inside; the light from the lantern partly illuminated the dark world. Upon placing my leg on the third or fourth step, I felt as if I had stepped on something. It felt like broken glass. Indeed it was broken glass. I swept the lantern across the pungent air right in front of my face. I kneeled down and let the light hit the step where I had found broken glass. On the next step, there was a glass jar and top edge of it had a piece fallen off, on which I had accidentally stepped. So, that was the sound I had heard. But what was this glass jar doing

there and who had broken it five minutes ago? There was no other passage to the cellar, and if someone had broken in, he or she must be still inside. I descended downstairs carefully and the buzzing increased with each step I took. I reached the cellar; my foot was finally on the mushy floor of the basement. I was surprised to see that there was a wall right in front of me. The buzzing sound seemed to come from behind me so I turned around. To my surprise there was a golden glow behind the staircase. I walked past the staircase and there it was a splendid sight for the eye. A room of gold!

There were around a hundred glass jars placed on wooden racks on all three sides of the chamber behind the staircase. They were all emitting golden rays. What were they filled with?

Coins of gold? Some hidden treasure?

However, if they were gold coins, then why were they moving? They were floating inside the jars and hitting the walls of the jars.

I inched closer to the rack on the southern side and zoomed in to see the magical entities inside the glass jar.

Fireflies!

Not one, but a hundred fireflies in each jar, and over a hundred thousand fireflies in hundreds of jars emitting brilliance that lit up the dark hell of a chamber. That was the source of the buzzing sound. Why were they kept there, I wondered? In fact, who had kept them there? Had it been the so-called Frequent Visitor? But in that case, these poor creatures must have been caught at least a year ago, the last time he was rumored to be there. But fireflies do not live so long, do they? They hardly live a few days or weeks at the maximum.

There was confusion in my mind. I pitied the fate of those captive fireflies. They did not cause rabies. They did not bite and give infections. Nobody had the right to trap such harmless objects of beauty; they were nature's own watchmen. I started opening the jars one by one, setting those who were alive free!

In about five minutes, over thousands of fireflies had started floating around the cellar. Some could hardly fly and crashed down and lost their glow. While others flew high in joy and escaped out of the open trapdoor. Their buzzing suddenly shifted tempo. They seemed to be thanking me in chorus. It felt nice. The thunder outside grew louder, but that was all. I was excited upon uncovering the secret that existed beneath my own house. I was very curious to know what they were doing there in the first place.

And that was when I heard a loud cry; that of a woman from upstairs. It was my wife, Lavanya. The shriek shook me and I accidentally dropped the jar that I was holding. It shattered instantly and a few shards of glass pierced into my feet. I cried in pain and limped towards the stairs. The trapdoor had been knocked down; I thought that it must have fallen down accidentally. I flew up the stairs and pushed hard but the door did not move at all. It was locked from above. But who had done that?

I pushed again and again. Yes, I remember that vaguely. It was getting darker and my breathing got heavier. I struck at the door with my shoulders, but to no avail. It was an old building, but built with the strongest of materials. The shriek was getting louder and accompanied by constant cries for help. Oh my dear Lavanya! Yes, that was her! I tried harder. I was exhausting myself. I knew my feet were bleeding and that I would black out soon. My hands were trembling and I dropped the lantern. It fell down and exploded into a quickly spreading fire that caught my trousers first and then spread up my body.

I cried in pain, not from the physical burn triggered by the fire, but from an emotional one of not being able to help my wife who was screaming under mysterious circumstances on the floor above. As the fire finally broke into the innermost tissues of my skin I shrieked out my beloved wife's name,

'Lavanyaaa!'

I lost my balance and all I remember is falling down, knocking my burning head and limbs on the steps and finally settling down on the mushy floor amongst the buzzing of the frightened fireflies and the noise of the crackling fire.

I breathed in sighs, and wrenched in pain, and slowly every event in my life started playing in front of me.

The childhood memories with my brother.

The day I caught my brother kissing Cecily near the railing of Howrah Bridge.

The day I smashed that six in Eden Gardens. My first and only victory as captain.

My arguments with mother.

The peaks of Hindu Kush, dips in the Ganges, chants in Tirupati, sajdass in Ajmer, sevas in Amritsar, peace in Gaya and then ultimately the call of destiny in Kochi.

The visuals swept across my mind.

The taste of Mishti Doi.

The moment I first set my eyes on Lavanya; the moment I fell in love.

Moments spent in love. Moments spent together.

The day I married her. The night she accepted me as her God.

The *shuvo mudro* that she gave me, did I still have it?

This is the symbol of luck and I have prayed to all the gods to bless the holder of this coin at all times. Please accept this.

In a desperate attempt by my burning body to save itself, my right hand went inside my blazer's breast pocket. That was where I usually kept the coin. I prayed for the first time

in my life for the coin to be in its place. Lavanya had said that the coin would save its owner from ill fate. In the face of death, a human forgets all principles and surrenders to whatever gives him a glimmer of hope. I had surrendered to the *mumbo-jumbo*.

Sadly, it was not inside my pocket. I remembered placing the coin on the table where I was reading Camus' book.

Then I realized the one irrational mistake that I had committed in my life, despite living a rational life since I remembered; the mistake of putting my life on the outcome of a coin's toss.

The beauty of the city, the blissful backwaters, and the solitary mansion that captivated my soul; all came back to me. The tea-seller, the broker Sammy, the owner de royale, the maid Chinamma and ultimately that legend. The one that haunted... the one about whom everybody had warned me... the one whom I did not believe in... the one who was perhaps up there trying to kill my wife... the one whom they called...

That Frequent Visitor.

My wife's final cries faded away, so did the buzz of the fireflies and the crackling of fire.

I slipped into whiteness.

Part 3
The Frequent Visitor

Chapter 29

Clifford Mansion, Kerala *27th December, 2012*

Dawn spawned over the horizon as the topmost follicles on the sun's head germinated from the seemingly flat bed of water that was the Arabian Sea. The first rays of the morning made their presence felt as light glimmered into the dining room through the broken window on the southeast corner. The fireflies lost their shine and quickly retired to the darker corners of the mansion.

'I think it is time for you to leave.' Richard's ghost said looking at the girl's tired eyes, 'Child, you never blinked your eyes. Not even once and I am really sorry I should barred myself from narrating some of those dreadful incidents. It was after such a long time, somebody was here to listen to me that I forgot that I was talking to a little angel like you who should not be indulged with the tales of the tainted.'

'There are worst things to read about in the newspapers these days and then teachers at our schools say *Read Your Newspaper Everyday*.' The nine-year-old informed.

'Is it?' The ghost was surprised.

'My mother gave me Mr. Clifford last year. She said that he would always protect me. I believed that, however my friends told me that the soft furred bear was nothing more than a toy.' Shiuli said.

She looked out at the rising sun and continued, 'When mom died, everything she had said and had given me became very dear to me. As if all those kept her alive in my world. That was when Mr. Clifford made so much more special. I carry him everywhere and people laugh at me,' she looked at the furry teddy bear.

'Coincidentally after listening to your story I realized that my mother had been right. Mr. Clifford did save me last evening.' She looked at Richard's ghost and smiled, 'But in a different form altogether.'

'I did not understand, child.' The ghost shrugged.

'My life was in danger; those rascals could have done anything to me. I was helpless and then you saved me from them, Mr. Richard *Clifford* Baxter.' She revealed his name with a sense of pride.

'Oh yes, that is my middle name. I knew I had heard that name somewhere when you mentioned it earlier.'

'Yes, you told me a lot. But don't you remember anything after you were burnt that night?' Shiuli pressed.

‘Next thing I remember is waking up in this mansion feeling light as helium gas. I do not remember anything after that. I only remember things in bits and pieces.’ The ghost revealed.

‘Things were different; I realized that I could pass through locked doors and walls but could not step outside the perimeter of this mansion. I could not find any trace of my wife, there were torn curtains in the bedroom where she was sleeping that night and my coin had disappeared. The visitor did not leave my coin either. My only companions were the fireflies that were burnt with me that night.’

‘The magical fireflies!’ She exclaimed.

‘Indeed!’

‘How can the fireflies step outside the mansion?’ Shiuli asked with curiosity.

‘They do not.’

‘What do you mean? Those fireflies carried me over the clouds and brought me here.’

‘You see, they do not have to *step* outside the boundary. They can fly.’ The ghost explained.

‘I do not believe it. Have you ever tried it?’ Shiuli asked.

‘I have tried many times Every time I step outside the boundary of the house; I hit an invisible wall and fall back.’

‘There must be a rational explanation behind this.’ The girl concluded.

‘Dear child, I used to run after rational explanations during my lifetime and here I am; an irrational creature.’ Richard’s ghost sighed. Once again, he looked outside the window and said, ‘Perhaps it is because the undead soul has restrictions. The fireflies are restricted to daylight and I, being human, am restricted to the confines of my habitat.’

‘That is fair enough for a reasonable explanation.’ Shiuli smirked.

She turned her gaze around at the old mirror of the dressing table. She moved towards the mirror and looked at herself in it. She looked like a princess. When she grows up, any high school boy would look twice at the gorgeous young woman that she would bloom into. Her eyes were Brown, while her lips were thin and pink. The breeze from her air travel earlier made her hair unruly. She never liked long hair, and always kept it trimmed.

‘You are a fine young lady, beautiful. Sadly, you resemble my mother when she was young or so I feel. I do not know, my memory has not been witty of late.’ The ghost spoke from behind.

Shiuli turned back, the ghost was right behind her. She looked back at the mirror and as expected, she did not find its reflection in it, ‘Wow, so you do not have a reflection.’

‘I am afraid, I do not.’ The ghost confirmed. He continued, ‘I think you will have to go back home on your own. The fireflies are down until sunset.’

‘But I do not know the way,’ she checked her pockets and swore in despair, ‘Shit! I do not have my phone either.’

‘Do not swear, child.’ The ghost advised.

‘How am I gonna get home?’

Just then there was a sound from the main door. Someone was unlocking the door. The sound of the latch cautioned the ghost and he quickly peeped out through the window

and checked, 'It is that the fat man again. I know he comes here often. He used to come here with that Broker Sammy. He is an clumsy young man, always breaks a thing or two, and farts around carelessly.' Richard's ghost revealed, 'Wait, there is a lady. Was she not the one who took you back last evening?'

'Pishi?' Shiuli said surprised.

'Is she the one? Dear, she is gorgeous. I can see where you get your beauty from; it is in your genes. But how did she know that you would be here?'

'She is a journalist, one of the best.'

'They have unlocked the door.' The ghost explained, 'Just pretend to be unconscious.'

'And?' Shiuli asked. She could hear Pakhi calling out Shiuli's name in great anxiety.

'Just do it. This is the uppermost room of the mansion, it will take them some time to reach here. When they see you, naturally they will try to wake you up. Just tell them that you do not remember anything. She will believe that you were sleepwalking or else the fat man will start a rumor that the frequent visitor had brought you here.'

'But...'

'Just do as I say!' The ghost ordered.

'But I want to...'

'... Pretend or I will make you faint for real and you do not want that!'

'But I promise you that I will find out the rest of the story and set you free from this curse, you with me?' Shiuli objected and right then they heard the door burst open.

'*Shiuli Dutta...*' Her aunt exclaimed upon seeing her talking to a portrait hanging on the wall, 'What the hell are you doing here?' Pakhi interrogated with a raised eyebrow, 'Whom are you talking to?'

'Errr... I... I was talking to...' she stammered and suddenly saw her bear on the floor. She picked it up and said, 'I was talking to Mr. Clifford!'

'How can you talk to Mr. Clifford.' The fat man spoke as he entered the room, 'He has been dead for sixty years.' His said in a shrill voice.

'It is her teddy bear,' Pakhi interrupted.

'Wait. What did you say? Who is this Clifford that you are talking about?'

'The last resident of this mansion. He lived here sixty four years ago with his wife, and his middle name was Clifford.' Iyer said.

Shiuli looked around. The ghost of Richard was gone. There was a portrait of him in that room – the one with his wife. Iyer moved towards the wall on which the portrait was hanging. He procured the worn portrait in his massive hands and wiped off the dust and cobwebs from its surface.

'He was a foolish Englishman who dared to move into the mansion against a million warnings from my grandfather. His wife was an Indian.' Iyer revealed.

Broker Saami is Iyer's grandfather. Shiuli thought.

Iyer continued, 'My grandfather was a great scholar from Tripunithara. Every one called him Broker Saami for he also dealt in property and matchmaking. This was the last house that he brokered. The one that sealed his fate forever in a prison of its own. This foolish man and his wife lived here for two days and then on the third night both of them

disappeared. Nobody ever knew where they went, but people at that time said they heard screams of the woman on that unfortunate night.’ He passed the portrait to Pakhi.

Shiuli silently looked at her aunt who was studying the portrait closely.. However, she was glad that it was keeping Pakhi’s attention away from her. Meanwhile Iyer continued, ‘This mansion has a history and it is not safe for women at all. For decades this legend was locked out, but last evening your daughter broke into the mansion and released the curse again.’ He looked at the girl and asked, ‘Are you alright dear?’

Shiuli nodded.

‘Let us get out of here before something else happens. I must call the *tantrikan* to perform some *poojas* on this mansion again.’ Iyer turned towards Pakhi and asked, ‘May I have the portrait back?’

Pakhi gave back the portrait reluctantly.

‘It is weird,’ she said, ‘the lady in the picture.’

‘What about her?’ Iyer asked.

‘I want to know more about her.’ Pakhi said in a spooky manner.

‘I will tell you everything I know, if you agree to get out of here at this instant!’ Iyer requested.

The women nodded and Iyer followed them out of the mansion. Shiuli noticed there was a sudden change in her aunt’s face. Pakhi had definitely picked up something that had completely lured her attention towards the woman in the portrait. Lavanya Baxter, Richard’s wife.

Chapter 30

‘Yes Parosh, she is alright. We found her in the old mansion. She does not recollect how she ended up in the mansion. I think she was sleepwalking with her teddy bear.’ Pakhi said on her phone.

‘We are having breakfast here in a seaside café with Mr. Iyer. Yes, the man we met last evening. Sure, we will be back by noon. Take care.’ She disconnected the call and placed her phone on the table. Across the table sat a hungry Mr. Iyer who was munching his masala dosa as if it was the last one on the planet. Shiuli sat next to Iyer; her mind seemed to be somewhere else though.

‘*Mishti, ki holo? Aamke boluna.*’ Pakhi asked.

Shiuli ignored her aunt’s question; in fact, the question never even reached Shiuli’s ears. She was lost in a world of thoughts.

‘You know,’ Iyer spoke as he munched on the mashed potato from his masala dosa, ‘it is perfectly understandable,’ he chewed some more, ‘for a young girl like *Sooli* to go into a psychological trauma after spending an entire night in that haunted mansion.’

‘It is Shiuli, Sh...eeyu...lee, not Sooli.’ Pakhi corrected him.

‘Yes yes, Sh...oo...lee. You see, she must have been sleepwalking like you said but not a single soul on this island would take that for a *logical* reason, including me.’ Iyer took another bite and then continued,

‘You see, the mansion is almost a century old and has seen lot of doom and death since the year it was built. I am glad that your daughter, Shooli, did not get a scratch on her body.’

‘Mr. Iyer, *Shiuli* is not my daughter. She is my niece and I am sorry but I think you do not understand the meaning of the word *logical*, do you?’

‘Oh very well, I do, madam. I am a postgraduate in English literature.’

‘Go on, I would like to listen to the so called legend of the haunted mansion.’

‘This story is not for the ones who are weak at heart.’ Iyer said motioning his head towards Shiuli who was still lost in another world.

‘She has seen worse I believe and right now she is not even listening to us. Let’s hear the story.’ Shiuli clarified.

‘The year was...’ scratched his head, ‘1910 or 20.’

‘1920, the year was 1920.’ Shiuli interrupted, her gaze was towards the east.

Startled by her sudden involvement in the conversation, Pakhi looked at her niece who had gone back to her thoughts again.

Iyer continued, 'Yes, it was 1920. I am very bad with dates and years. My grandfather narrated this story to me when I was just as old as she is.' He said glancing at Shiuli. He continued,

'His Highness Rajendranatha Varma, as a wedding gift for his beloved daughter-Sreevidya Devi, got this huge mansion built in the year 1920. Rajendranatha was an ardent admirer of the Victorian art and architecture; therefore, he hired the best man from London to prepare this masterpiece. It was the most expensive mansion in the entire region of Thirukochi until those Marwaris constructed that hotel in Kalamassery last year. The mansion aroused so much jealousy among His contemporaries that there were rumors about fellow rulers from Travancore and Mysore conspiring against the rise of the mansion. The king had a son from his previous marriage, Mrityunjaya, who displaced himself from his father's affection after the king married his second wife (mother of Sreevidya Devi) soon after Mrityunjaya's mother lost her life to illness. The act did not go well with a young Mrityunjaya who isolated himself from the rest of the world and started living on a diet of drugs and...' Iyer paused and glanced at young Shiuli.

'And what?' inquired Pakhi.

'I cannot say all that in front of this young girl.' The fat man stated.

Shiuli got up from her chair and walked away to the table on the corner.

Iyer was relieved and he continued narrating the story, 'He unheralded women as soon as he entered his adolescent years. He grew into an arrogant psychopath and everyone loathed him. Women were afraid of him. He always accused King Rajendranatha for the death of his mother and for being partial towards his daughter. Moreover, when Rajendranatha declared the alliance of Sreevidya Devi with the royal family of Travancore, Mrityunjaya revealed his intentions to marry a woman he kept. The woman belonged to a lower caste, therefore, it angered the king who ousted Mrityunjaya out of the family. The King did not invite the wretched son to the grand wedding of his stepsister, which took place the following month. My grandfather tells me that that wedding had the most lavish procession that the kingdom of Thirukochi had ever seen.' Iyer gave a pause to his story to take a sip of coffee from his steel tumbler.

Pakhi looked at her niece who had started staring at the sea from the far corner as well. Meanwhile, Ramaprasad Iyer contemplated on ordering another cup of coffee as he sipped the final drops from his current cup. He called a waiter and asked him to bring another cup of coffee in the native language. He turned back to Pakhi.

'What happened after that?' Pakhi asked inquisitively.

'Doom dawned upon the entire mansion.' Iyer said.

'Doom?'

'Yes, the bride, groom, their families, and almost a hundred odd guests stayed back in that mansion for the night; a night that never saw the light of day.' Iyer looked at Pakhi's face for a reaction.

A tide rose and struck the shore as Iyer continued narrating the story, 'All the guests were found dead. Poisoned. The bride, the groom, the King, the Queen, all of them... *dead!*.'

‘Oh dear, so the entire lineage was lost?’ Pakhi asked.

‘Not the entire lineage. There was one person who was not invited to the wedding, one person who had all the motives to perform such a devious act, one person who could commit such a heinous act.’

‘Mrityunjaya?’ Pakhi exclaimed.

‘Yes, Mrityunjaya, the bride’s stepbrother who was ousted from the family a few days before the grand ceremony. Everyone suspected him for foul play. However, there was not any proof of that. Beneath sheets of charges and accusations against the notorious man, Mrityunjaya was still the sole heir to the property, another clear motive for the mass murder.

‘Lack of proof and a little corruption under the desk got young Mrityunjaya a clean chit from the court. Soon thereafter, he married a beautiful girl from the royal family of Tripunithara. People thought that the marriage to a splendid woman would reform the beast. However, what is crooked cannot be straightened.

As expected, he simply misused his power. Money gave him powerful supporters, but no friends. He started gambling heavily, his body took refuge in ritualistic and modern drugs whilst his lusty desires drove him to fetch needy women from neighboring states and cities like Kovai, Madurai, Madarasipattanam, Coorg, and Malabar. For few pots of gold, husbands would give up their wives and he brought one woman every month, on the night of *pournami*.’

‘What’s *pournami*?’ Pakhi interjected.

‘*Pournami* is the night of the full moon.’ Iyer explained.

‘But why full moon? Was he suffering from some kind of lunacy? It is well known that lunatics are at their peak on nights when the moon shines brightest. Asylums in medieval Europe tranquilized lunatic patients for days to prevent them from turning violent when the moon is high.’ Pakhi stated.

‘His mother succumbed to death on such a night.’ Iyer said.

‘Oh! That explains it.’

‘And what he did to these women was way beyond a normal person’s imagination. Upon bringing them here, he subjected them to extreme physical and mental torture. Rape was a word too kind to be used for his acts of brutality. Most of the time dead bodies of raped women were found floating in the sea, just below the cliff the following morning. The lucky ones escaped only to succumb to painful designate en route.

‘One such victim who survived gave birth to an illegitimate child. She kept the doomed baby at the doorstep of the mansion and was never seen again. Some people believe that she jumped into the sea. By this time, Mrityunjaya was thirty six and had already lost all of his property. His wife had passed away few years back, with whom Mrityunjaya had one son called Chandrasena. Mrityunjaya locked himself up in the mansion all the time; however, he found a soft corner for the baby. He called the baby boy Suryasena. Surya grew witnessing the beastly acts of his father. Another decade passed, Chandrasena grew up and was married. He had a son whom he named after his glorious great-grandfather’s popular name, Jagan. One day Chandrasena learnt from some of the fishing folk that he had a brother living in the mansion with his father. He immediately sent his men to the mansion. Upon reaching there they found Mrityunjaya lying dead with a naked woman. The young Surya was about to

commit suicide when the sentries caught hold of him. When Chandrasena saw the young Surya's face, he was left in utter shock.'

'Why?' Pakhi asked.

'Suryasena looked exactly like his own son, Jagan. Like identical twins.' Iyer revealed with utmost fascination that drooled from his mouth in the form of coffee froth.

'But they were not twins; Suryasena was Jagan's step uncle, wasn't he?'

'Yes, but they looked like twin brothers.'

Pakhi nodded in affirmation for she had done a research last year about non-fraternal genial resemblances which existed in apes and how a certain group of scientists were working together to disassemble the gene that gave physical and facial resemblances. They had performed their research on a dozen pair of people who had 90 percent resemblance and belonged to different generations of the same family.

Iyer continued 'Chandrasena brought Surya home and raised him with Jagan, who was the same age as Surya. He gave both the boys equal amount of love, dedication, education and facilities. Both of them were sent to boarding schools and later attended the same college abroad. However, only one of them returned home. Surya drowned himself in the lake outside their university campus in London. This came as a big shock to Chandrasena for he loved Surya dearly. Jagan could not finish his education in London, so he returned to India. He continued his studies in Madras. The real story begins now.

'Few months after Surya's death, which many believe was suicide, people started seeing light and movement inside the abandoned mansion, and that too only on the night of the full moon. Some even heard moaning of women occasionally. Then one morning, the anglers witnessed a floating body of a naked French woman in the sea, brutally raped. They knew the ghost had returned. The ghost of the notorious Mrityunjaya or his ill-fated boy – either one of them visited the mansion to destroy helpless women.'

'The frequent visitor...' Pakhi whispered.

'Yes, the frequent visitor some said. My grandfather was the caretaker of the mansion; he performed a great *bhootamukta yajnya* at the mansion to get rid of the evil soul that had lurked in after so many years. My grandfather was a learned man and was well versed in all *mantra-tantras*. It took seven days and six priests to drive away all evil from this mansion and then they locked this mansion with a sacred lock protected by a *dwimukhi rudraksha*. There was a limitation to *dwimukhi rudraksha*; it could only confine human souls to the boundary of its property.' Iyer said.

'Is that why outsiders are not allowed on the island after sunset?' Pakhi asked.

'Exactly, but only on the nights of full moon, otherwise they are allowed.' Iyer clarified.

The breeze from the sea was getting colder and thick layers of clouds were covering the sun. Shiuli had surrendered her senses unto the calmness of the sea, while Pakhi shivered at the chaos building up in the sky.

'So, did the tantra stop the onslaught?' Pakhi inquired.

‘Well, it did. For two years, nothing was heard about the visitor until that Englishman showed up. That foolish white man who mocked my grandfather and our gods. That idiotic Mr. Clifford.’

‘Mr. Clifford, Oh my God!’ Shiuli broke out into a sudden exclamation from the distance, ‘I left him in the mansion, on that table in the bedroom on the southwest.’

‘What? I thought you carried him with you.’ Pakhi said worried.

‘No, I did not carry Mr. Clifford with me. Please, I have to get him.’ She got off her chair and started leaving towards the mansion.

Pakhi ran to her and halted her on the way.

‘You are not going anywhere, dear.’ Pakhi commanded.

‘But I want him. I can’t just leave him there.’ Shiuli’s eyes had filled up, she burst into tears, ‘You know na... that was mom’s gift for me.’ Her eyes dilated like a kitten’s pupils and Pakhi could not resist emotional blackmail that came with it.

‘Fine, you are staying outside, Mr. Iyer and I will go inside and bring it. Is that clear?’ Pakhi asked as she gestured Iyer to accompany her up the hill.

Shiuli nodded and followed the grown-ups. Iyer seemed a little dejected upon having the women accompany him. He did not want them to go to the mansion again, the feeling of insecurity clearly showed on his thick face. As for Pakhi, this second trip to the mansion was twice as exciting and scary at the same time for now she knew many dreadful things about the mansion’s past.

As they walked on the sand, Shiuli held her aunt’s left hand. Pakhi looked at her niece. She looked weary and her hair was all dry and tangled. Something reminded her of the portrait she saw back in the mansion.

‘What is on your mind, Pishi?’ Shiuli asked her.

‘It’s rather weird to think of, but that picture on the wall...’ Pakhi recollected.

‘What about it?’

‘The woman that Iyer mentioned, she looked just like... like your mother. As I look at you right now, under the tinted light of that shy sun, I am reminded of those eyes...of...’

‘Lavanya Ghosh?’ Shiuli said.

‘Ghosh? No, her last name was Baxter, Is not that what Mr. Iyer told us?’

‘Well, I am sure that he has not told us everything.’

‘I thought you were not listening to us and what do you mean by everything?’ Pakhi asked as she took her hand away from Shiuli.

‘You will know... soon.’ Shiuli said and smiled. After all, she knew more about the visitor.

Chapter 31

It was always dark inside the palace and it smelled of damp wood everywhere. For Parosh Chandra Dutta, this was exactly a way of gratifying the senses. It reminded him of his summer vacations in Kolkata, back when he was a child. He loved visiting his grandfather, whose voracious sense of humor never aged a single day. His grandfather had a library in the attic where one could find the latest magazines to old unbound manuscripts from the days of Kalinga. Parosh was brought up in the heart of Delhi and every year he would wait for the month of May to arrive, for that was when the schools would close down for the summer break and his parents would take him to Kolkata, to his dearest grandfather. He was the man who inspired him to become a storyteller. His grandfather would always say; *never leave a page unturned if you find a book and never leave a book untouched if you find a library*. His grandfather passed away due to sodium deficiency during Parosh's twelfth class preparatory examinations. He knew that his summers and hitherto visits to Kolkata would never be the same again.

Now the palatial home of the Varma in Tripunithara was almost like a mini museum, with antiquities and scriptures dating back to the beginning of the 16th century. The caretaker of the house, Suresh Gopi, had mentioned that there was a private library on the day they had arrived in the city. Parosh had a terrible morning for when he woke up he could not find his daughter in bed. He alerted Gopi, Pappan and Pakhi, and together they looked in every nook and corner of the house, the street, inside the Poornathreyasha temple, near the temple pond, and the church near statue junction. Alas, they could not find her anywhere. They were aware about Shiuli's somnambulism, a sleeping disorder where the patients would arise from their sleep and walk or perform activities in a state of low consciousness. Pakhi suggested they look for her at the mansion where she had been *lured mysteriously* a night ago. Parosh dismissed her suggestion mockingly. However, the stubborn woman that she was, Pakhi instantly called up the caretaker Iyer on her phone and went down tracking her niece in the eastern dock of Fort Kochi.

An hour later Parosh got a call from his sister on his cellphone that his daughter was in the Clifford Mansion. Parosh breathed a sigh of relief. He sent Suresh Gopi to pick up Pakhi and Shiuli from Fort Kochi. Pappan had to leave early for his wife's delivery. Parosh had the complete, partly renovated, palace to himself. He loved investigating his subjects, and this time he had the privilege to dig into the life of the most successful man in the history of Indian politics. In his twenties, Parosh instantly formed an incessant inclination towards communist principles and at the hem of this lusty inclination was MC Jagannatha Varma. He single handedly motivated an entire generation of Malayalee youth in the nineties to come out of their houses and appeal against the corrupt government that was evolving around the womb of the common man. The movement was quickly embraced by the youth of the entire

nation and the man rose from a mere party worker for the communist party in a small town in Kerala to become the next prime ministerial candidate of India.

Parosh had a nice evening with the Varma family. The pleasantness, however, did not last long. The entire chapter of Shiuli's disappearance took a toll on him. Parosh could stay in the town as long as he wanted, but he wanted to finish his work at the earliest and leave. He had set a deadline for his stay in Kerala. He had already wasted a day, and there was no way he could have ignored the casualty for it involved his daughter. He wished that he had not brought his daughter at all. And after the second event of his daughter's disappearance he decided to speed up things. He wanted to leave as soon as possible or at least send her back with Pakhi to Gurgaon while Parosh would stay back a little longer. He had lost his wife a year ago; he could not afford to lose another loved one. The very thought of losing a loved one brought tears to his eyes.

He wiped off the tears and stepped inside the library. Although spots formed by whitewashing material filled the walls of the narrow corridor that led to the library, but the rest of the library was untouched. It had perhaps been untouched for centuries. It was a beautiful sight for any book worshipper; Parosh was a clergyman when it came to books. His grandfather would have loved to have his ashes placed in such a temple. The library was a good thirty feet in breadth and over fifty in length; the dimensions were larger than the base layout of his entire house. As soon as he entered the antique library, he was welcomed by rows of English classics on either side and the smell of damp moss. Some of them dated back to the seventeenth century and were original impressions, while others were recent reprints by Indian publishers. He could see a single rack placed perpendicularly to the ten parallel racks running across the length of the library. The rack was filled with indices, family albums and other legal documents. He picked one of the recent looking indexes and went through its pages; it was a typewritten one. He looked for family history and bloodline.

After running through few more indices he finally got what he wanted in a shabby 1967 index. He dusted off the book's cover and it read;

VARMA DYNASTY, 1861-1963

The book was a fair documentation of all the vibrant rulers of the Varma dynasty, and the various members of the family that ranged from the very king to the farthest relatives of the distant cousin who was married off to Mysore.

He flipped through the first three pages and found a list in the fourth one. The pages were dark brown with age and almost as crisp as baked wafers. He quickly skipped to the penultimate page. The page depicted the royal family tree that started from the head of the dynasty in the year 1861 till 1963.

The list began with the name of Jagannatha Varma I who headed the dynasty from 1861 till 1895, the heir to the crown was his son, Rajendranatha Varma. He ruled for thirty years and then was followed by his son, Mrityunjaya in 1920. Parosh's subject, Jagannatha Varma was the grandson of Mrityunjaya Varma. However, there was a name on the lowest branch on the left side of the page that generated from Mrityunjaya Varma and it was scribbled over with black ink, as if to hide its very presence of the page. From his trouser's pocket, he brought out his carbon-rimmed specs and placed it on his nose. He focused hard to read what was typed beneath the scribbling. The branch generated from Mrityunjaya Varma,

Jagannatha Varma's notorious grandfather, or so he heard from the Varma family in the brief meeting he had had last evening. He could identify a *C* in the beginning and an *A* at the end.

So the name must be beginning with C, and ending with an A, he thought as he skimmed through the pages of the book that he had skipped earlier.

A missing member of the family, perhaps?

'There must be something here about this mysterious member of the Varma family.' Parosh said to himself as he beaded into the contents of the book.

Indeed, there was a lot to be revealed and the mystery had just begun. Parosh had got himself the key to the Varma family's holy grail itself. His pupils widened as he immersed himself into the contents of the book.

The game had just begun.

Chapter 32

The breeze that wafted in from the Arabian Sea had a mellifluous pain attached to it. It carried Pakhi's straightened long hair in a harmonic procession of a bridal palanquin. However, on her face, one could easily detect that restless curiosity of a sanctified journalist. As they walked up the path that led to Clifford Mansion, following the steps of Iyer, the only image that came into her mind was that of the gorgeous wife of Richard Baxter. There was definitely something about her that resonated a sense of familiarity into Pakhi's investigative mind. Meanwhile, Shiuli walked patiently with her aunt without uttering a word. The silence irritated Pakhi further. Finally she broke the silence.

'Mr. Iyer, what do you know about this woman, Lavanya Baxter?' she asked.

Iyer was a middle-aged man who was leaving his cardiac health to the mercy of obesity. As he walked up the path, he panted for breath. He gestured Pakhi to wait using his left hand without turning around. After finishing the final flight of ascent, he spoke,

'Mrs. Baxter was a Bengali widow whom Mr. Richard married to save her from a committing a ritualistic suicide.'

'Sati?'

'Yes. In her community at that time, a young widow was not allowed to live, let alone remarry, after the demise of the husband.' He said between short breaths.

He pulled out the mansion's key from his shirt's pocket and unlocked the front door. He opened the door and the three entered the mansion.

'So, the Englishman married this widow just like that?' Pakhi asked inquisitively. She eyed Shiuli who was following closely, inspecting the antiquities all around her in wonderment.

Iyer switched on his LED torchlight and spoke as he illuminated the way for the ladies, 'I do not know much about his personal life, but my grandfather told me that he had fallen in love at first sight. The woman was blessed with subliminally sharp facial features: dark brown eyes of the shape of a divine lotus and lips wide and thin that left men craving for just one touch. Her body so lustrously arousing that even women would fall in love with her,' he turned his head glancing at the gorgeous reporter and then pointed to another portrait on the wall,

'There you see another picture of the lady. Isn't she gorgeous? I have never seen anyone as beautiful as her ever in my life. I mean, if I had somebody like her, I would have never come to live in a place like this. The Englishman was a fool or maybe simply wanted to ooze off the woman's juice, just like his country did to our beloved India.'

Iyer's sentence was followed by a sudden shattering of glass upstairs. Pakhi grabbed Shiuli and stared up at the ceiling. Iyer pointed his torchlight around to check for any bats or mongooses.

'It is an old mansion; even the wind can break these windows.' Iyer declared with a confidence that masqueraded his suspicion and nervousness. He forced a smile and as he progressed towards the spiral staircase said, 'What was I saying? Oh yes, the woman. The woman only spoke Bengali and English. She never spoke with anyone else but her husband.'

Pakhi's curiosity was pumping up but Shiuli was getting irritated at the fat man's alleged description of the woman about whom she had heard from the ghost of the Englishman himself. When she did not like something, she would flush it down the drain and she wanted to do that right now. But then she saw something in the corner of the hall, right next to the staircase. The sight brought relief and Shiuli put on a content expression on her face.

Meanwhile Iyer continued his story, 'They lived here for two days and on the third night, the two disappeared. Some believe that she ran away with the visitor after killing the Englishman.' and then there was a loud thud on the floor.

Something tripped Iyer and he fell down on his face. The impact broke the wooden step. A thick stream of blood oozed from his left nostril.

'Oh dear, are you alright?' Pakhi asked.

'*Get away, it is a shining snake!*' He shouted pointing towards the *thing* that slithered below.

Pakhi looked down and saw the end of what seemed like the tail of the snake, crawling under the step through a crack. She jumped in fear.

'Relax, those are fireflies!' Shiuli corrected calmly.

'That is a snake, and it tripped me. I felt it pulling my leg.' Iyer accused angrily.

'I think *the visitor* pulled your leg.' Shiuli spoke mysteriously mocking the fat man's prior warnings. She started laughing as Iyer made a desperate attempt at getting up on his own.

Pakhi gave Iyer a hand sympathetically and helped him get up. She hissed angrily, '*Mishti!*' Pakhi scolded her niece, 'Do not make fun of Mr. Iyer. I do not believe in such things as ghosts, but of late I have been having weird experiences that is forcing me to give second thoughts to the subject of the paranormal.'

She thought about the story of the stranger's ghost who met that kid in the Ghittorni metro station and then the dark image of the visitor crept in.

'Besides, if it was not for Mr. Iyer, you would not have been found. Twice have you been saved by him.'

Shiuli chuckled, 'Oh come on! Nothing ever happened to me, and after all this I am pretty convinced that nothing would have ever happened at all even if you had not found me.'

'What do you mean?' Pakhi asked

'I am not sure if you guys are ready to digest this, but I know something that would change your perceptions forever,' she shot a glance at Iyer who was wiping off the blood from his nose and commented, 'At least, someone will have his notions changed, for the better.'

'Young lady, you know you have started acting like a lunatic.'

'If you had gone through what I went through last night, I am pretty sure you would be acting the same way.' the young girl said.

'Oh dear, I understand.'

'No, you do not. You think that I am probably in a state of shock, because you saw me gazing into the horizon while you were listening to a discolored version of a story from this fat man,' Shiuli accusingly stared at Iyer and continued, 'while I was pondering over what had truly happened here. I could see it, in my mind and I was connecting the dots.'

Pakhi was getting worried at her niece's condition and Iyer was embarrassed. Shiuli did not like the dejected look on Pakhi's face. She took an ascending step towards her aunt and said in a cementing tone, 'Pishi, can I trust you to trust me?'

Pakhi nodded in a confused state of mind. She wondered where all this was leading.

'Then I want you to follow me quietly. Do not be afraid, just trust me.' she paused, inhaled and spelled, '*We* need your help.' She turned and started moving downstairs.

The Delhi-based journalist looked at the South Indian caretaker blankly. Something hit her and she retorted, 'Wait a minute, you said *we*? What do you mean by *we need my help*?'

However, by this time, Shiuli had already disappeared from the scene, Pakhi and Iyer had no other option but to follow her, – little out of curiosity and more out of anxiety.

Chapter 33

The young girl restlessly marched up and down the hall inspecting the tiled floor.

'It's got to be here somewhere.' Shiuli blasted out.

'What is it? What are you looking for?' Pakhi asked noting the desperation in the girl's tone.

'There is a secret passage in this hall. I am looking for that.' Shiuli revealed without looking at either her aunt or the pokerfaced Iyer.

'This house has many back doors, but none of it is in this hall.' Iyer added confidently.

'Mr. Iyer, I know you know more about this mansion than I do, but what you know is not the truth.' Shiuli guarded her stance, 'Could you guys give me a moment alone.' She requested.

Pakhi and Iyer turned around and looked at other things in the hall room. Iyer started wiping away the cobwebs with his hands.

She tried hard to remember the ghost's story. She thought hard.

What was Mr. Clifford doing right before he heard the noise from the cellar?

He was reading a book.

When was it?

It was at night.

She recreated the image visually.

Where was he reading it?

Iyer on the other hand had moved to the eastern side of the hall and dusted the table lying in the corner. He sat on the table and looked at Shiuli blankly like John Candy from an MGM flick.

'That's it!' Shiuli exclaimed as she looked sharply at the fat man who was shocked at the girl's exclamatory remark.

The staircase commenced beneath the wooden floor that was just half a dozen steps to the right of my reading table.

Shiuli ran towards the table, 'Iyer!'

Iyer jumped off the table, scared of the girl's athletics he pleaded, 'Come on! I did not do anything this time. I was just sitting on this really old table.'

'Exactly!' She said with a wide smile that lit up her angelic face.

She stepped to the right side of the table and measured six strides. She knelt down at the spot. The tile had a bolt and a handle. She carefully unbolted it and pulled the wooden tile with the handle. Iyer and Pakhi looked on in wonder. Shiuli had opened the door to the cellar.

A secret passage.

Chapter 34

Parosh let the beads of sweat that lined up on his forehead drop to the floor. It was very humid even though it was winter, but that was the climate of Kochi. Not once did he take his eyes off the book until he finished every page written in it. Even the blank ones were examined closely. He had marked one page and had dog-eared it so that he could revise it again after finishing the journal.

He closed the journal and then pinned his index finger inside and felt the decked pages between the covers for an irregular gap created by the folding of the page. He opened it and read the description on the page again:

Jagannatha Varma II

Jagannatha Varma was the son of Chandrasena Varma, who was the last monarch of the dynasty. Jagannatha Varma II, named after his great grandfather, was born in the year 1935, had studied in London, Madras and Delhi. He was a liberal man who was a revolutionary during his college days. He rejected his family wealth in the year 1961 as he felt it was against his principles.

The next two paragraphs were scribbled over by thick lines of black ink paint, similar to the scribbling on the penultimate page containing the family tree. The succeeding pages were torn off from the book by someone as he could see bits of paper sticking to the binding thread on the inner margin. Someone had deliberately torn off the pages.

He placed the book back on the shelf and browsed for more of such kind. The shelf got dustier as he went inwards. He navigated to the *E* section on the seventh shelf. It contained old files, most of them were bitten to dust, while those that remained hardly held themselves together. Parosh feared that the pages might crumble upon touching them. He pulled out a set of files from the section cautiously, without letting the bottom touch the edge of the dusty wooden rack.

Mrityunjaya Chandrasena Jagannatha Varma II

The file contained all medical and academic reports adhering to MC Jagannatha Varma. The academic reports ranged from excellent to outstanding. Totally impressed by his subject's scholarly background, he started out with the medical section. Most of the reports were from pediatricians, few from pathology labs and couple more from an orthodontist. It seemed that he had fractured his leg. The accident was severe and the treatment complex.

However, this was followed by reports from a psychiatrist. At first, Parosh convinced himself to the possibility that little Jagannatha, or Jagan as they called him, must have gone into trauma after the accident. But the reports kept reappearing, and the frequency only increased. There were, in total, sixteen reports from psychiatrist from 1944 till 1957.

Why did Jagannatha Varma need constant visits to a psychiatrist as a teenager?
Parosh kept asking himself. He started reading the first report which was dated the seventeenth of December, Nineteen Forty Four.

And then his phone rang.

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Chapter 35

Shiuli descended down the staircase which led her to the cellar as mentioned by the ghost of Richard Baxter. There was a pungent smell in the air which pressed into her lungs through her nostrils. She almost fainted. Pakhi and Iyer also went through similar sensory feelings.

The steps were coated with dust and termite waste and numerous spider webs made flight over them. Every time Shiuli placed her foot on the step, she would break an entire intricately woven network of spider webs, Pakhi and Iyer followed protocol. Iyer was the last one to enter and he was about to close the entrance tile.

'No, don't! Leave it open, please.' Shiuli commanded.

Iyer turned forth, lit his torchlight and started descending the staircase with Pakhi. A tiny speck of yellow light entered through the entrance. Nobody noticed the glow under the LED lights' bright illumination.

Shiuli reached the second last step when she felt as if she had stepped on something. She looked down. Iyer threw light on the step and she picked up something and examined it.

'Rusted metal and glass attached to it.' Shiuli said and remembered what Richard Baxter had used to see in the dark. She passed it to her aunt.

'It seems like a broken piece from a lantern.' Pakhi deduced.

'Mr. Clifford's lantern.' Shiuli clarified and stepped on the floor, 'Mr. Iyer, can you please give me the torchlight. I need to show you something.'

Iyer threw the electronic torch towards the young girl who caught it reflexively.

She pointed the torch right below and requested them, 'I want you to come here and look at this, *calmly*.'

Pakhi could see the wall that was carbon black in front of her. She stepped down carefully and stood next to Shiuli. She looked down at the floor and gave out a whispering shriek in horror. Iyer came in quickly and upon seeing the object on the floor he jumped up a step,

'Ayyo! Amma!'

'Shhh...' Shiuli hissed. She went on her left knee and picked up the horrifying object from the degraded floor and revealed proudly, 'This, my dear Pishi, is the skull of Mr Richard Clifford Baxter, who was burned to death in this cellar.'

Pakhi's emotions sprang up from different quarters. She was not sure if she was enraged or horrified. She sprouted out words like drops of water from a sprinkler

'How... did you know... that... this was... here?'

'I told you, I know a lot more than any of you.' Shiuli chuckled.

'You are holding a dead man's skull and you are not even scared.'

'That is because the skull is lifeless and its owner is right behind Mr. Iyer.'

Iyer burst into a scream and sprinted up, but the trapdoor fell back on the floor and bolted itself from outside. Iyer punched on it desperately with both hands.

'Ayyayo, please let us out, I do not want to die. *Venkateswara Kaapaathane!*' He cried.

'Shiuli, p... p... please tell me what is going on and that everything is going to be alright.' Pakhi pleaded.

'Pishi, trust me, we are fine. But everything is not alright, at least, not for Mr. Clifford. I mean Mr Clifford, the ghost.' She rectified.

'Why would that be, I wonder?' she said between shivers, 'Is he still here, because I cannot see him.'

'No, he went upstairs. Pishi, what I am going to tell you is the true story as heard from the Englishman himself. I want you to listen carefully because *we* need your help.'

'What kind of help?' Pakhi asked.

'Please, get us out of here!' Iyer yelled with teary eyes.

'Mr. Clifford bolted it from above so that he does not get out of here and bring all those townsfolk here. It will not serve our purpose. Could you please ask him to calm down.' Shiuli requested her aunt.

'I am having a hard time keeping calm myself, I don't think I can afford to calm him down. Please tell me what help do you need from me?'

'Well, Mr. Clifford's ghost told me its story, right from the beginning till the end. But remember, you once told me that only those people become ghosts who could not fulfill their purpose at the time of death?'

Pakhi nodded, unable to answer her out of fear.

'We must find that purpose in order to set him free.' Shiuli concluded.

There was doubt in Pakhi's face and Shiuli tried to reassure her.

'Trust me, Mr. Clifford is a very nice man... err... ghost. In fact, he is the one who saved me yesterday from those thieves. He scared them off with his magical fireflies.'

'Magical what?' Pakhi interrupted.

'I will tell you everything, but we must do something about this Iyer. He will surely bring people and wreck all the remaining chances of getting Mr. Clifford to heaven.'

'Heaven?' Pakhi questioned.

'Yes, the place where good souls go after death. Like mom said.'

'Wonderful!' Pakhi replied trying to convince her atheistic mind that she was probably too high to hear anything that did not lack common sense.

The wooden trapdoor unbolted itself and Iyer pushed it open and rushed out of the cellar screaming. This was followed by a metallic thud and succeeded by silence.

Shiuli and Pakhi rushed upstairs and saw an unconscious Iyer lying flat on the floor. A swarm of golden light formed a string that tied itself to Iyer's feet and pulled him up and placed him gently on the chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

'Magical fireflies!' Shiuli introduced her aunt to the wonderful friends of Richard Baxter.

Pakhi stared in bewildered wonderment.

I must be really, really high! She thought.

The swarm detached itself from Iyer's feet and tied him up with the cobwebs surrounding the chandelier.

'That will take care of him.' Shiuli announced with confidence. She looked at her aunt who had her eyes locked on the ceiling. She asked, 'Pishi, are you ready to hear the ghost's story?'

Pakhi affirmed in gesture and the swarm guided them to the dining hall where Shiuli narrated the ghost's story as it was.

Chapter 36

'We have reports coming in live from the residence of the prime ministerial candidate Mr. MC Jagannatha Varma, and they are saying that the man of steel nerves has...' Parosh muted the television set's volume. He could see the reporter move her tender lips on screen.

So, it is true! Parosh thought as he read the breaking news mentioned on the channel's ticker:

Assassination attempt on Varma.

He switched to the next news channel.

PM candidate escapes death, reported MANORMA 24X7.

Lashkar militant suspected of assassination, Headlines Today speculated.

More than half of the so called *breaking news* on channels these days were based on subsidized facts and conveyed biased speculations. Content and marketing panels hired by the media networks carefully analyze the trending topics, with or without hash tags, and create *breaking news* out of scratch. They never give out real news, but only the sensational bits. Speculative news to speculate speculations. Parosh had developed a special hatred for news channels, and MANORMA 24X7 was on top of that list, mainly because his sister worked for it. He was wise enough to understand that it was purely out of sibling rivalry that he had developed that special hatred.

He picked up his cellphone and dialled Pakhi's number again, but once again the automated female voice said 'The number you are trying to connect is currently unreachable, please try after some time.' And then the same was repeated in Malayalam.

Irritated, he sat down to type down another sms.

Jst pick up d damn fone or call me bk. Urgent! Get rid of dat fone btw.

He was not worried about his daughter or Pakhi, but the call he received on his cellphone while he was in the basement was important, and it was meant for Pakhi. He pinned his right hand into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboro. He absolutely loved the bitterly incense-like smell of the imported brand. He lit one cigarette from the pack.

About thirty minutes back, while Parosh was going through the contents of Jagannatha Varma's health reports, he received a call on his cellphone. The call was from an anonymous number and was for Pakhi.

'This message is meant for Pakhi Dutta, I assume that you are a very close and trusted aid.' a shriveling voice spoke on the phone.

'This is Parosh Chandra Dutta, Pakhi's brother. Who may this be?' Parosh inquired.

'Convey my message to Pakhi Dutta, there was an assassination attempt on MC.'

'Whoa, what, you mean MC Jagannatha?' Parosh jumped up in disbelief.

'Indeed, however, he got away this time but for safety reasons he is going underground for 48 hours.'

'I am so...'

'I have confirmation from the most reliable source that he has headed to his hometown in Kochi.' the voice spoke in a crystal clear tone.

'Are you sure?' Parosh confirmed.

'Kindly convey the tip and ask Pakhi to send my reward to my Noida apartment by Friday.'

And then the line went dead. Parosh quickly pulled out the reports from the file and sprinted out of the library to the guest room and switched on the television. There had been an unsuccessful assassination attempt on MC Jagannatha Varma. He called Pakhi many times but her number was not reachable. He had misplaced Iyer's number so he could not call him either.

Reality had started to behave like fiction and there were more elements of coincidental commotion than peaceful chaos. From the disappearance of his daughter, finding her at the abandoned mansion, her second disappearance, finding her the second time at the same old place, to an assassination on the subject that he was working on, MC Jagannatha Varma. More importantly, he was secretly on his way to Tripunithara. The secrecy was perfectly understandable, as any person would prefer to avoid the media as well as the conspiring minds behind the attempt.

Parosh, however, did not regret it, but the feeling of getting on the edge of an investigative adventure only excited him. He exhaled smoke in rings and looked at them ascending into the air. He dropped the cellphone into his pocket and picked up the reports. With great caution he held the tattering pages and studied them in detail.

Chapter 37

'His wife's final cries faded away, so did the buzz of the fireflies and the crackling of fire,' Shiuli filled her lungs with an air of sigh and released, 'He slipped into whiteness.'

Pakhi gazed into the virtual screen that had been projected by the ghost's tragic story ordained by Shiuli's extraordinary storytelling skills.

'That's it folks, that is all that he remembers. When he woke up, he realized that he was lighter than before and could walk through matter.' Shiuli pronounced.

'Extraordinary!' Pakhi inferred. Being a journalist, she was well accustomed to sit through stories no matter how 'over the top' they might sound., But this was something she would have never imagined. One of the most important realizations from this was the *fact* that *ghosts did exist*.

'So, Pishi, will you help us?' the niece asked nicely.

'Is he here?'

Shiuli looked around and sighed again, 'No, he is tending the magical fireflies. Fireflies are nocturnal when alive, so for them it is quite natural to be inert during the daytime. So, they are both resting somewhere.'

'Since he has become such a good friend, I was wondering why have I not been subject to an appearance? Jokes apart, his story is tragic.'

'Is not it? We must find out the purpose of Mr. Clifford, at the time of his death.' Shiuli requested.

'Well, is it not obvious?' Pakhi said twirling the palm of her right hand clockwise.

Shiuli gave up.

'His mind was hooked on to one thing and one thing alone, at the time of his death...' Pakhi revealed, 'His wife, Lavanya Ghosh Baxter. He wishes to know what happened to Lavanya that night, and his soul is stranded here in the vague hope of information.'

'But how can we ever know what happened to her that night? There was nobody else here that night. If only she was alive, the chances of which are nil.'

'You are forgetting him.' Pakhi reminded.

'Of course not, he was locked up in the cellar.'

'Not Mr. Clifford.'

'Then?' and it struck the young girl, 'Ooooh! You mean him, the visitor?'

'Yes.' Pakhi smiled.

'But how do we trace him. How do we know if he is even alive?'

'Yes, that's true. Maniacs of his kind die young or rot for centuries. But the only way we can put the pieces together is by collecting all the individual pieces first.'

'How many pieces do we have?' Shiuli asked.

'The ghost's story concreted some of the seemingly mythical facts from Iyer's story. I think we are short of a few pieces only. The ghost cannot step outside the boundaries of this property because of the presence of Dwimukhi Rudraksha. We need someone who can help us with the local history – a native aid.'

They heard someone moaning from the hall. Pakhi and Shiuli looked at each other and giggled..

It was Iyer.

Chapter 38

Iyer motioned his head sideways, his forehead felt a little sore. He tried getting up but was held tightly by a network of cobwebs. He realized he was way above ground level, and the realization led him to scream out loud, shattering half broken panes of the rusted mansion.

'*Amma, yenna ithu? Kaapathane Kadavule, Enne Kaapathane! Aarum ille ivide?*' He yelled for help desperately in his mother tongue.

Shiuli entered the scene gracefully and called out for Iyer, 'Hey you?'

Iyer arrowed his fat head towards her voice, although he could not see her, he said, 'Shooli?'

'Aargghh! I am not talking to this guy!' she roared and called her aunt to initiate the negotiation, 'Pishi!'

Pakhi came in and requested, 'Mr. Iyer, please do not panic. We have everything under control.'

'Panic? Control? Do you not see what has been done to me? Do you not see where the golden serpent has put me?'

'They are fireflies!' Shiuli bit her teeth. Pakhi gestured her to calm down.

'Look, Mr. Iyer, I understand that you are in a very uncomfortable position but you have not been harmed at all. We just tied you there so that you do not bring people in here and seal the house down with all that *tantric* rituals.' She paused for a while and then spoke slowly, 'What if you were helplessly looking for a reason to live but could not remember how. What if nobody ever let you investigate?' She took few steps forward and stood right under the chandelier to which Iyer was tied,

'Think of that poor soul which is neither dead nor living and stuck within the confines of this place forever. How pointlessly frustrating would that be?'

Sympathy started to grow on Iyer's bubbly face.

'Are you getting me, Mr. Iyer?' Pakhi asked for a confirmation

In return she received something primitively resembling a nod of the head.

'The ghost is not *the visitor*; it is just a poor victim of the visitor. A very decent ghost and it will get you down only if you promise us that you will not scream or attract unwanted crowds here. Can I have your word?' Pakhi asked.

'Yes, please get me down. I am begging you.' Iyer cried like a child, twisting and turning beneath the cobweb, trying to break free.

'Mr. Iyer, stop shaking yourself, it's a very old chandelier and will come off the ceiling, you will fall and...' before Pakhi could finish her cautionary, the chandelier broke loose and came crashing down.

First there was the shattering of the glass crystals, followed by a really loud thud of a huge bottom making contact with the ground.

'Amma, my back!' Iyer writhed in pain.

'Now, look what you have done to yourself.' Pakhi sympathized.

'It is the ghost, the ruthless and cruel visitor!' Iyer cursed.

Shiuli could not stand Iyer anymore, she immediately stepped in and threatened him, 'Look, here is the deal. One more word about the ghost or the visitor, be sure that you will incur the wrath of the ghost and your entire family be cursed forever.'

'No!' Iyer whispered in fear. Pakhi looked at Shiuli in shock.

'Yes! The ghost just said that, he is ready to curse you.' Shiuli blackmailed.

'No, no, no. I do not want any curse; please tell the visitor that I will cooperate in any way he wants.'

'For starters, he is not 'the visitor'. He is the ghost of the Englishman who died a horrible death here. Secondly, he was a good man and so was his wife. The visitor brought this doomed fate upon him and his wife. And finally, just answer whatever my aunt asks you and help her at any cost. Do you get that?'

'Ye... yes, I will help you. Please get me up, I have hurt my back.'

'Oh! By the way, it is not a golden snake,' Shiuli instructed as she let the swarm pick up Iyer off the floor, 'they are fireflies. Dead ones!'

Iyer shivered as the fireflies weakly carried him across the hall and placed him on what appeared like an old settee.

'Great move, young lady. Pakhi was surprised at how she had taken care of Iyer.

'It's easy to negotiate with superstitious people.' Shiuli winked at her aunt.

The magical insects lacked the intensity of the previous night, but then they were creatures of the night, wandering about in the virtual darkness created by the paltry illumination of the mansion. Pakhi asked Shiuli to wait at the mansion's entrance, while she interrogated Iyer. She did not want the young girl to hear accounts of the victims who were doomed in the mansion.

'Mr. Iyer, please tell us when was the last time the visitor was reported to visit this mansion?' Pakhi began her interrogation.

'Yesterday when this girl...' he shot an arrogant look towards Shiuli and continued, '... came in here.'

'I obviously meant before that.' Pakhi stated.

'Oh, 1948. The night of the Clifford's disappearance.'

'Had there been any other rumors after that?'

'None at all. People were scared, and they had started sealing the island off after sunset on *pournami* nights.'

'Interesting. Anything particularly common among the victims besides being molested females?'

'They were all outsiders, did not belong to this land and...' Iyer stopped and gazed into the ceiling.

'...and?' Pakhi pressed.

'They were all poor needy women, bought off for handsome sums in gold from their families until Mrityunjaya Varma's death. But the visitor did not follow this pattern; the women he brought were random women, mostly prostitutes.'

'This means, the visitor was not the dead man's ghost or evil spirit, but someone alive who was simply a seeker of dominating pleasure. And the tag of a ghost or evil spirit would always keep the people away from any form of investigation.' Pakhi deduced.

'What about the fireflies?' Shiuli interjected, 'there were thousands, and lakhs of fireflies inside those glass jars in the cellar.'

'I do not know anything about the fireflies.' Iyer confessed.

'One last question for now,' Pakhi said, 'Is there by any chance any sort of connection between any character from this story and MC Jagannatha Varma, the minister?'

'Of course, Mr. Varma is the current owner of this mansion and the only surviving heir to the royal bloodline.'

'I am sorry, did you say *only surviving* heir?' Pakhi asked shocked by what she had just heard.

'He is the legitimate son of Mrityunjaya Varma.' Iyer added.

And before she could dwell into the quicksand of reality, her phone rang. She rushed outside to attend the call.

Upon seeing her aunt rush outside, Shiuli walked towards the staircase that was a few hundred feet from the entrance.

'I am going to get Mr. Clifford from upstairs.' Shiuli told Iyer, the very name of Clifford brought fear in his eyes that were already red from tears. Shiuli corrected, 'Oh, not the ghost, my teddy bear Mr. Clifford. I will be right back so do not do anything stupid.'

Iyer nodded. Shiuli turned around and that is when she noticed something. She turned her back towards Iyer. Iyer was not sitting on a settee, he was placed on the Englishman's reading table and on that table lay a book, the one that Richard was reading that night. She picked up the book, dusted its cover which was in tatters..

The Stranger.

She opened the book, flipped through the pages and then she found a bookmark on the fifteenth page. She pulled out the bookmark. It was a very old black and white photograph, as worn out as the book's cover.

'Shiuli, it was your dad and he has given some shocking news He will come to pick us up in thirty minutes.' Pakhi said while coming inside. She looked at Shiuli who was gazing at the picture with unearthly astonishment and asked curiously, 'What is that that you are holding in your hand?'

Shiuli handed over the picture to her aunt, who upon looking at the subject, recoiled in shock, 'Oh my god! This cannot be true!'

Chapter 39

After dropping off Iyer at his house, Suresh Gopi drove back to pick up Pakhi and Shiuli from the mansion. Parosh also stayed back with them till Gopi returned.

'Parosh, I have something to show you.' Pakhi said as she got in the car.

'I have something to show you as well,' Parosh motioned Suresh Gopi to start the car. He looked at Pakhi and requested, 'Let me start.'

'Sure, go ahead, what is it?' Pakhi asked.

Shiuli sat in front next to driver's seat and held on tightly to her teddy bear.

'Well...' Parosh pulled out few documents from the file that he had kept in the pouch behind the driver's seat. After handing them over to Pakhi he started explaining his findings,

'It appears that our most certain next prime minister once used to be a loony and needed psychiatric help.' he stopped to look at his sister who was going through the medical reports.

He continued, 'I went through the Varma family history and Jagannatha Varma's personal files. It was all there in the library. MC was a bright young boy, although he succumbed to mental trauma at the tender age of eleven when he lost someone dear to him to a suicidal accident. Someone who has been mentioned in the reports as *him*. This person's name has been scribbled off from the family tree as well. It seems as though the family did not want anyone to know about this particular person's existence., I am guessing *He* is MC's brother...'

'Uncle!' Pakhi interrupted without raising her head.

'What?'

'Yes, this *He* was MC's uncle Chandrasena Varma, the illegitimate son of his grandfather, Mrityunjaya Varma.' Pakhi revealed.

'But... how do you know?'

'Trust me, I know a lot more than you can imagine, I have known more than I can digest. I have realized that fiction can be very factual.'

'Chandrasena Varma, of course, beneath the scribbling on that page on the journal, I could see that that particular name began with a C and ended with M and A.'

'I cannot believe any of this.' Pakhi expressed her thoughts on the medical reports. She looked at her brother who was eagerly awaiting her comments.

'Go ahead, I see from your face that you have more to tell. Surprise me, come on.' She challenged.

'He used to get delusions after the death of his brother, err... uncle and most of them had suicidal manifestations. Sometimes he would transform into this dead uncle.'

'Schizophrenia!' Pakhi coined.

'Exactly! However, he was treated for the same until he was in his thirties.' Parosh confirmed.

'According to the reports, the illness was triggered by an accident that occurred when he was seven years old. The trauma of watching an elephant stand over him, crushing his right knee left him crippled physically as well as mentally. According to the ortho reports, he could never walk without a limp ever.' He locked his eye with Pakhi and asked, 'Have you ever noted that?'

'I am afraid I have not. I mean, I barely get to see him walk. Most of the time he is either standing or sitting. Besides, it is normal for a seventy nine year old man to limp once in a while, so I never took note of that.'

'Speaking of which, we must expect him at the palace anytime today.'

'Yes, I know, but you must pretend that you don't know a thing!'

'Obviously. By the way, what were you doing all this while in the mansion? Looking for the ghost?' Parosh teased.

Little did he realize that the joke he made was on him for Pakhi had learnt something far more surprising than the mere existence of the ghost. She pitched her left hand into her shirt's pocket and pulled out a square photograph, the edges of which were decaying.'

'Take a look at this, and I bet you will forget everything you ever knew about anything.' Pakhi claimed and waited for his reaction. Shiuli was also looking at her father in the rear-view mirror. They waited for his reaction.

Amidst chuckles, Parosh took the picture in his hand and looked at it. At first, the picture was not clear, he put on his specs and brought it close to his face.

'Dear Lord! This is not possible!' He cried in disbelief.

Chapter 40

As the car entered the driveway of the palace, there was an Innova already parked in the porch. Pappan pulled out a huge trunk from the Innova's dicky and carried it inside. The Duttas got out quickly and dashed inside. Suresh Gopi recognized his owner's Innova and assisted Pappan with the trunk.

As soon as Parosh entered the drawing room, a familiar voice greeted him, 'There is my young author! Come sit with me.' He motioned towards the sofa set next to his, 'My favorite reporter and a beautiful young lady are here as well.' He welcomed Pakhi and Shiuli who followed Parosh to the sofa.

'I think Shiuli needs some rest, it has not been a very pleasant outing for her.' Parosh requested the minister.

'What happened to her? Is she alright?' He inquired with concern.

'It's a long story, but please let her go.' Parosh said.

'Of course, dear angel, get some rest. Do not bother yourself with the adventures of the elders.' Jagannatha humored.

Shiuli got up and went upstairs.

Jagannatha Varma noticed the toy in her hand and asked Parosh in a surprised tone, 'Is she really carrying a teddy bear with her?'

'Well, that's another long story. But we have got a more important story to discuss here, I believe.' Pakhi interrupted with a quick reply.

Pappan walked past the drawing room and the minister immediately ordered him to bring tea and snacks for everyone.

'Oh so what were you saying' the minister asked Pakhi as if he had not heard her comment at all.

'There was an attempt to kill you this morning.'

'I think I have become unbearable for my rivals. Moreover, I am a soldier of this country. I am fighting for it, and death is equivalent to martyrdom in war.' He spoke in his usual tone of a highly motivated revolutionary.

'I think we have already heard enough of your patriotism, why don't you tell us what happened?' Pakhi cut short. She had always suspected his motives when the minister's ideologies switched from left wing to the right two decades ago.

The minister was surprised at her attitude, for the reporter had always showed great respect towards him. Nevertheless, he asked, 'Didn't you watch it in the news?'

'We are afraid we did not.' Parosh apologized on behalf of his sister and himself.

'What happened exactly?' Pakhi asked with concern.

'I was addressing the youngsters who had gathered in front of the Rashtrapati Bhawan. They had been getting very violent and were venting their anger in the wrong

direction.. I thought I should talk to them and calm them down and lead them in the right direction.' He looked at the Dutta siblings and both of them were listening to him carefully.

'Someone shot me from behind. We looked around but found no one.'

'Well, that is the reason why even ordinary MLAs take protection while attending mass gathering. You are the next prime ministerial candidate, and you refuse to take protection.' Pakhi reasoned, 'Sometimes you should let go off your principles. Biting too hard on them might leave you toothless.'

'Maybe you are right, but like I said earlier, I would rather die the death of a martyr than live the life of a coward.'

There you go again, Pakhi thought.

'Delhi Police has started its investigation and I wanted to keep myself away from questions and allegations, so I came here. I will stay here for a day or two.'

'Don't you think that the crowd in Delhi would miss your presence? Maybe they will think that you got scared and went into hiding.' Pakhi alleged.

Before Varma could answer Pakhi's allegation, his PA joined the scene with a tray of tea-filled cups and laid it on the center table. Pakhi glanced at the PA in a suspicious manner.

How come he is the only who shows up repeatedly after I am tipped with the info of MC being alone? The question came up in Pakhi's mind more than once. Just like the last time she was tipped by her secret informer about the minister walking down to the Rajpath, she had found him with his PA. And now, when she had been tipped about the minister's secretive visit to his hometown, he was with him. Now it is perfectly alright for the minister to take his PA everywhere, well that's what they are for – personal assistants. However, it was the informer she was suspicious about. How did he know about Varma's whereabouts unless and until he was told about them. Maybe the informer had an informer, someone who served as a close aid of the minister. Someone like the PA of the minister?

'Is there anything wrong?' The PA asked Pakhi as he handed her a cup from the tray.

'Just trying to connect some dots.' She said while receiving the cup.

'Maybe you should just drink the tea before it *gets cold*' He said piercingly in a voice that sounded chilling.

'I would request you to leave us alone; we have to discuss something in private with Mr. Varma.' Pakhi requested.

The request brought an ignominious retreat on the PA's face. He looked at the minister who gestured him to leave politely. The minister's PA obeyed the non-verbal instruction.

'I do not trust him.' Pakhi whispered.

'Why don't you trust Nissar?' Varma asked the nation's favorite journalist.

'His presence triggers suspicion. Besides, what we are about to discuss is something excessively confidential.'

Varma placed his cup of tea back on the table, clasped his hands together, and leaned forward.

'Parosh, as you were already aware, came down to research on your childhood and growing up days, the things in the past that shaped you as this dynamic political figure in the

present. I came here to take some time off with my niece; however, I have been dragged into Parosh's research by certain *extraordinary* forces.' She said.

The minister chuckled when he heard the word *extraordinary*.

Pakhi continued, 'And being a journalist, I could not keep myself away, you know, the passion to dig out the truth from a seemingly deep trench.'

'And what is it exactly that you *dragged* out of this *seemingly deep trench*?' The minister asked.

Pakhi drew out the medical reports from the file that she had kept next to her on the sofa and waved it in front of the minister, 'These!'

The minister tried hard to look surprised.

'Do you remember any of these, Mr. Jagannatha Varma II? Dr. Priyamvada Shekharan...' she read out from one of the reports, 'she says that the twelve year old boy occasionally invites some serious delusions leading us to use the sedative prowess of tranquilizers.'

Varma pushed back on the sofa, closed his eyes, and listened quietly.

'It seems quite clear that you have or rather had a serious mental illness owing to the suicide of your *identical relative... your uncle*.'

Varma opened his eyes wide as if the last words from the journalist had punched through his spinal cord.

'It is *Him!*' He spoke, as if speaking within a trance, 'It had always been *him*.'

The minister fell in a state of silence thereafter. Parosh and Pakhi looked helplessly at the minister and then at each other. The silence was broken when Parosh's cellphone rang. He went outside to receive the call. It was an urgent call.

Pakhi leaned forward and asked, 'Who is it?'

'You know who, you already know.' The minister replied.

'But *he* has been dead for over sixty years now.' Pakhi stated.

'*He* never died; *he* said he will come back.'

Chapter 41

‘*Hollo*, Parosh dada?’ The youthful voice on the phone said from the other line.

‘Byom? Did you convey my message?’

‘Yes, yes. I spoke to Didima.’ Byom said.

‘Did she agree?’ Parosh asked curiously.

‘She has not been keeping well of late; she asked if you could shift your plan to the coming week?’

‘Byom, please listen to me. This matter is extremely urgent. It could affect millions of souls and it involves her. I cannot reveal anything to her, all I want her to do is board the next flight to Cochin and come here. I will pick her up from here.’

Byom, the young volunteer who worked for a charitable trust in Kolkata, sniffed the desperation in Parosh’s tone and like hundreds of other young Indians, Byom too idolized his favorite writer- Parosh Dutta.

‘I will convince her.’ He promised, ‘How is Shiuli?’

‘She is not well, that is why we need Didima even more urgently. Can you please make her understand that this is terribly important and I will free her as soon as possible? This will not affect her work. In fact, if things fall into place, This visit would be the greatest act of charity of her life.’

‘Yes, I will tell her.’

‘I am reserving a ticket for her, hope she can travel alone.’ The writer said.

‘She is as hard as a diamond; there is no need to doubt her willpower.’ Byom praised the woman who raised him from a homeless infant to a responsible adult.

‘Great! I will forward the ticket details in ten minutes.’

‘Sure, goodbye dada, please convey my regards to Pakhidi and Shiuli.’

‘Thank you, Byom, take care.’ Parosh hung up.

He opened the browser on his and booked a ticket for a senior citizen. Instantly, he got an sms from the website confirming the payment along with the ticket details. He forwarded it to Byom and walked inside.

Chapter 42

Ten minutes ago

Pakhi noted fear psychosis infused in the eyes of the man who had single handedly stirred the entire nation. Never before had she seen the man before her in such a state of mind and body. The wrinkles on his forehead drew themselves unexpectedly, so did the weariness in his eyes. He looked old and weak.

‘I knew... *He* will come back one day.’ He said in a spooky tone, his voice shook, ‘He said that he would.’

‘How can the dead come back?’ Pakhi questioned, although her indirect tête-à-tête with the ghost of Richard had changed her perceptions about life after death.

‘Because, he never died. He hated life and he hated me. He loathed my intelligence and revolutionary ideas. He found himself burning in the never-ending inferno of jealousy and sibling rivalry. And above all...’ he took a moment and pronounced in a hushed tone, ‘...he was a psycho...’

‘But you never mentioned anything about him, to anyone, ever.’

‘I was afraid. The only people who knew were the doctors and my father.’ The scared minister revealed, ‘my father never believed me. He thought that I had gone insane after *his* death. He took me to Dr. Shekharan who first deduced the reality in my claims. She understood the seriousness of the matter and how dearly it would mean to me if she could make my father understand the truth.’

‘But all those reports, they clearly state that you were suffering from...’

Pakhi was interrupted by Parosh who had returned after attending the call.

‘I am extremely sorry; it was an urgent call from a dear friend of mine.’ He apologized for leaving without consent.

The minister hardly heard the writer’s apologies; instead, he continued his story ‘Those reports were forceful.’

‘Forceful?’ Pakhi asked sipping tea.

‘Threatened were those who compiled the reports.’ The minister said.

‘I do not understand. Who threatened whom?’ Pakhi asked.

‘I am sorry, what did I miss?’ Parosh stated his unawareness.

‘Tell me, Mr. Varma, who threatened whom?’ the journalist pressed.

‘He threatened all those people to rewrite their reports in such a way that it would declare me mentally unfit for any profession.’

‘What?’ Parosh recoiled on his sofa.

‘Yes, *he* did that.’

‘Why?’ Pakhi asked.

‘Because he hated me; was envious of my accomplishments and good fortune. I had a loving father and family, while he had an illegitimate father who was notorious as the darkest

hour of the night. Although we looked almost alike, people looked at him with sympathy or disgust, sometimes both.'

'But at the time of the first report, the one that Dr. Priyamvada Shekharan inferred, you were eleven years old. Since your uncle was also about the same age, he should have been in his pre-teens too, right? How do you explain a twelve year old threatening an experienced medical practitioner who was three times his age?' Pakhi asked.

'*He* was no ordinary boy. He did not have a normal childhood. He grew up witnessing his deranged father molesting hundreds of women right in front of him.' The minister spoke as if everything was being projected on an imaginary screen in front of him. He continued, 'The first thing he did when he hit puberty was to pin down the janitor of our boarding school. He raped that helpless 60-year-old woman when he was just eleven. He had sheer force in his arms and his shoulders could withstand heavyweights even back then. He was blessed with limitless physical strength and cursed with a deranged mind.'

'Oh my God, so you are saying that this boy threatened to molest the doctor you were consulting so that she could fake a report and spoil your future?' Parosh asked to clarify.

'Did you check that name?' Varma asked.

'No.'

'Well, she disappeared from the face of earth one fine day in 1956. Nobody knew where she had gone.' He paused to look at the shocked faces of the listeners. He added, 'I knew what happened to her because *he* told me.'

'Yes, 1956. That is when you started consulting another doctor,' Pakhi turned pages of the file and read out, 'Dr. Martin Peter.'

'But what happened to Dr. Priyamvada Shekharan?' Pakhi inquired.

'He killed her.'

'But why?'

'Because she was growing tired of faking my reports. She could not lie to her own conscience anymore. She was an able doctor and a great human being. He killed her because she was about to let the cat get out of the basket.'

This was followed by a momentary silence. Jagannatha Varma eyed the two siblings

'Do you not believe me?' Varma asked desperately.

'I am not saying that I do not believe you, I would like to believe your sibling rivalry has resulted in many a great homicides in the past, here the two of you were brought up together by your father like siblings, though he was your uncle. However, your story crosses the boundary and enters the realm of fiction when you started with a 13 year old manipulating a 36 year old psychiatrist by verbal threats.'

'And when I tell you the extent to which he has gone to spoil my reputation and my life, you will not believe a word.'

'Please go ahead, we are all ears.'

'Do you remember one of the key events of 1971?'

'The Indo-Pak war?' Parosh asked.

'No.' The minister rejected.

‘Wasn’t that the year you contested an election, which you lost eventually.’ Pakhi guessed.

‘Yes, do you remember why I lost that?’

‘Allegations were made against you. The opposition claimed that the bomb blast at your opposition’s rally was chalked out by your men.’

‘Yes...’

‘Oh my God! No! You are not implying that...’ Pakhi made a gesture with her eye.

The minister nodded and revealed, ‘It was *him*. He did it, he knew that would add a nail into my coffin.’

‘The blast killed twenty five people. You were disgraced.’ Pakhi recollected.

‘Then there was the cannabis scandal in Idukki, the sexual harassment of a female government servant and half a dozen more cases to defame me.’

Pakhi had the most sensational news of her career and she could not believe the fact that his own look-alike psycho uncle had framed the man of the moment on a number of occasions. Despite all the attacks, the man only came out stronger than before.

‘I never heard from him after 1991. I thought *he* gave up or maybe he had died as he was also getting old like me.’ The minister said.

‘Yes, it was post-91, your golden rise in Indian politics.’ Pakhi said glorifying the minister’s achievement.

‘Today I know that *he* still lives and that he has come to kill me.’ Varma said lowering his head in shame. He pulled out his gold plated pocket watch from his kurta’s inner pocket and opened the lid. He looked at it and then snapped the lid shut, ‘I think my time has come. Luck cannot save me every time.’

‘How can you be so sure about it?’ Pakhi interjected while Parosh looked on.

‘I am not suspecting it, I know it’s *him*.’ Varma’s words had a sense of finality. He rose from his sofa to retire.

‘I guess I can help you come out with the truth. You have the media’s support, at least I am on your side.’ Pakhi offered her sincere help.

‘Do you know that Gandhi and her men are already looking for any reason to defame me? This will highlight the prime ministerial candidate as a psycho. Now tell me, who will vote for a psycho? They’ll get this bit of information, will exaggerate the facts and serve it to the public and you know how mob mentality works, you are in the media, right?’

‘Trust me Mr. Varma, with due respect, I know what mob mentality can do. We serve them the news the way we want it. On so many occasions, we have presented truth as fake and they have bought it. This time will be different for the truth will be put forth as nothing else but truth, and they will buy it because every single soul in this dynasty driven nation has faith in you.’ Pakhi said confidently.

The minister blessed the young reporter and started walking to his resting room silently. Not once did he turn back.

Parosh looked at the man with awe and respect, and felt a little sorry for him.

Then it struck him, the one thing that he noted.

‘Pakhi...’ He whispered into his sister’s ears.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Did you see that?’

Pakhi shrugged her shoulders and asked, ‘What?’

Parosh closed in and hissed, ‘The minister *does not have a limp.*’

Chapter 43

‘Yes Sir, I am positive about the development. I am not going to reveal his location details but will go on air with the entire matter as soon as I get a solid lead to get to the root of it.’ Pakhi spoke to the editor of MANORMA 24X7her news channel.

‘You seem quite pumped up; I hope this is not based on some wild tip.’ The editor reconfirmed from the other end of the line.

‘It is not. If my investigation is successful, our channel will reveal one of the greatest political conspiracies of all time.’

‘Global?’

‘Indeed.’

‘I am looking forward to that; I will be ready with a live exclusive as soon as you give me your word to go.’ The boss assured her.

‘Thank you, I will keep you updated. Good evening!’

‘Good luck!’

Pakhi took a deep breath to relieve her of the stress that had enveloped her from all sides. Parosh embraced her from behind.

‘What did she say?’ Pakhi asked her brother as she leaned on his chest for comfort.

‘She has already left for the airport. Her flight makes two stops and she will land early in the morning tomorrow. If everything goes according to plan, we might pull it well by evening.’ He ensured.

‘Thanks Parosh. I know this is not what you expected to happen during your visit here.’

‘Are you kidding me? This is exactly what a writer wishes would happen!’

The sister smiled and gave gingerly peck on her brother’s cheek and left. Parosh watched her fading into the distance. He pulled out another cigarette from his pocket. He would have been a complete disaster after his wife’s death had it not been for his sister’s constant efforts to bring him back on track. He dropped the cigarette on the muddy lawn and went inside the house.

He walked to the drawing hall and sat on the sofa to go through the file on Jagannatha Varma again, just to make sure that he had not missed anything. While flipping through the reports his glance went beyond the upper circumference of the file and spotted something shiny lying in front of him on the sofa where the minister had been sitting fifteen minutes ago. He placed the file down and went to pick up the shiny thing. He called out for his sister loudly.

Hell, you might even crack the code behind that pocket watch that he carries with himself everywhere.

That was it, the pocket watch. Parosh picked it up, curious as a cat. The walls around him seemed to close in on him as he he snapped open the watch’s lid. The case opened and so did his eyes.

‘What happened dear?’ Shiuli inquired.

He showed what he was holding in his hand to his sister and her eyes grew large as she saw what was inside. The confirmation of one detail could turn out to be the missing link to the entire case of *the visitor*. She took it from her brother carefully.

Pakhi snapped the lid shut and quickly put the watch in her jeans’ pocket before anyone could see her doing it. She knew she had cracked the case, but it still needed an eyewitness to confirm the validity of the clue that Parosh discovered.

She had the key to the visitor’s grail.

Pakhi, you owe me your life now. Parosh thought in sheer excitement.

Chapter 44

The following evening
28th December 2012

The old woman swept her arm across the open window of the sedan, her wrinkled skin felt the breeze accelerated by the velocity of the moving vehicle. She had been there earlier, only that there had not been so many tall buildings or vehicles on the road the last time around. Gently she espoused her upper body towards the window and peeped out. The regimented breeze questioned her presence; however, she had little to donate there. Her white hair danced to the song of the breeze as her eyes gazed in wonderment at the concrete jungle that had found prominence on Tharaparambu Road.

The sedan took a turn to the left and entered a bumpy pocket road that led to a *kachcha* road. The concrete giants had disappeared and once again, she smelled a familiar air as a strip of damp trees replaced them. Her head kept bumping onto the top of the window every time the sedan went over a boulder on the way. She saw dark clouds in the sky behind the trees, one after the other. She closed her outworn eyes and tried to trace the path to the mansion as she had seen it years ago. There was the rumble of an approaching thunderstorm, and sparks of lightning curved in the horizon.

The regimented breeze subsided into a smooth one as the car came to a halt. She pulled her head inside and with closed eyes, she opened the car's door and stepped outside; right foot first. There was an impact as her foot touched the earth beneath, that of a child embracing her mother after a wait of ages. She took in a deep breath and placed the left foot on the ground as well. The air was not just familiar, rather the same as the one she had inside her heart. Slowly she started walking towards the mansion's entrance door. Occasionally, she stepped on a big stone or a broken piece from a boulder. She moved forward slowly. The middle-aged man with glowing fair skin looked on at the woman related to him by law. She walked with few more faltering steps and stopped. She opened her eyes and there it stood, the mansion, like a majestic monster in front of her. She looked at the mansion in awe.

She walked up the ramp and stopped right in front of the entrance door, which in itself was a beast made out of pure teak and coated with bronze. The double door was guarded by a pair of ivory tusks.

She ran her eye from left to right and then lifted her right hand and pushed the right door with all her might...

And the door opened to a gorgeous smiling face; the face of her great granddaughter.

The face of Shiuli Dutta.

'Shiuli, my baby, what are you doing here?' The old woman asked in a tense tone.

Parosh walked to the door, placed his right hand on the aged woman's shoulder, and said, 'That is exactly what we want to know from you.'

Chapter 45

The minister's Innova swept across shaky metal railings of the Thopumpady Bridge at a steady acceleration against an increasingly regressive wind that came with the message of an incoming thunderstorm. The minister's PA kept the front window open making it impossible for Pakhi, who was sitting in the middle section of the SUV, to keep her hair set. Maybe that was her intention in the first place. Despite his age, the minister was known to be virile and aggressive. He looked at Pakhi repeatedly; the silky hair of the glamorous journalist flowing wildly and falling carelessly on her face and into her mouth lustrously gave his old body a run for its testosterone. Nissar, the minister's PA, kept glancing at the sultry journalist in the rear view mirror.

'I am sorry, is it my hair. Is it bothering you?' Pakhi asked.

'Not at all, in fact I am enjoying the show that they have put on.' The minister winked. 'By the way, where are you taking us, lady?' he asked eagerly.

The journalist smiled projecting her shapely thin lips highlighted by blood red lip-gloss. 'I never really got a chance to get candid with you, I mean like a candid interview with you.' She bit her lower lip and smiled diabolically. The next thing she did was to pull out a long woman's cigarette and light it with a shiny zippo lighter. She was definitely trying to seduce the minister.

'We could have used our room at the palace to serve your purpose.' He postulated, a little suspicious at the journalist.

'Oh, come on, Mr. Varma,' she let out a puff of smoke on his face, 'Be a sport! How long are you going to stay in that old body of yours.' She patted the old man's thigh with her left hand.

'I don't see any point in coming all this way to give you a candid interview.' The minister put forth trying to masquerade the growing lust in his eyes.

'Why should there always be a point. Every woman likes to adorn herself with the shiniest of stones,' she paused to blink her eyes and added, 'and you are one hell of a stone.'

'I always admired women who think like you – forward and modern. Women who dare, who are not afraid. Women who can bring men down to their knees by the mere movement of a...' he looked at the burning source of smoke in her right hand and said, '...cigarette. Young women who make wise moves to climb up the ladder. I understand and I do not oppose it, as long as the benefits are...' he came closer to her and gently placed his left arm around her, and said, '...mutual...' A cunning smile showed up on his face.

Bastard, she thought.

Nissar eyed her suspiciously in the rear-view mirror.

‘I hope you will like what you see.’ She hissed in Varma’s ear.

The old man’s rusted heart raced, but cold was the stream of blood that rushed from his heart to the brain and cold was his hand that sent shivers down the journalist’s spine.

Chapter 46

Clifford Mansion

The old woman felt weaker with every passing second. She looked around. It was the very same view, rusted now just like her memory. Her auxiliary veins gave up their duties and a sudden rush of emptiness gushed into her brain, blacking out her view for a moment. She swooned to the floor and the two men, Parosh and Iyer, caught hold of her before she could fall. They carried her by her shoulders and placed her on an old teakwood chair that was lying in the corner of the entrance hall. Shiuli sprinkled a handful of mineral water from her bottle on her great grandmother's face. The old woman coughed back into consciousness.

'Are you alright, Didima?' Shiuli inquired with great concern for her great grandmother.

'H... How... How did you know?' The old woman questioned.

Shiuli looked at her father who in turn produced an old photograph from his shirt's pocket and held it out for the old woman to see.

'Dear Lord!' She burst into tears.

'All of us have seen a photograph of the beautiful young woman in this picture in your closet. Pakhi had found the copy of the very same picture lying inside a dusty old hardbound novel here on that table...' he pointed to the reading table and continued, '...inside this doomed mansion. This picture served as one of the missing links to our investigation. When Pakhi showed this picture to me I did not waste any time thinking. I instantly picked up the phone and asked Byom to send you here urgently.' Parosh paused, took a deep breath, and closed in on the old woman.

He spoke slowly, 'We know it is very late, but your part of the story can still help at least one soul attain salvation. We need you to tell us exactly what happened that night, the last one you spent here, Sister Marie or should I say,' he pronounced in an accusing manner, 'Mrs. Lavanya Ghosh Baxter.'

The atmosphere was charged with the sound of thunder and the front door opened again, somebody came in. Everyone on the inside looked at the incoming *visitor*.

Chapter 47

The minister nervously stepped inside the mansion. The reddish twilight outside faded into a lighter shade of yellow inside. Instantly, the air was fused with an effervescent odor of nostalgia. Nissar followed, while the gorgeous reporter dressed in black formals overtook the minister and introduced the minister, 'Welcome home, Mr. Varma.'

'What is going on, Ms. Dutta?' Varma asked feigning an uneasy look of confidence.

'I want you to meet a few people that you already know.' She paved way and walked to the four people gathered at the corner of the entrance hall.

All of them looked at Jagannatha Varma. While Shiuli, Parosh, and Iyer simply smiled mockingly at the minister, the fourth person seemed very troubled at the sight of the minister.

'You have already met my brother, Parosh,' the writer showed his sparkling teeth. 'My lovely little niece, Shiuli,' Shiuli followed protocol and bowed in front of the minister. Pakhi turned towards Iyer, 'Oh you know this man, the caretaker of this house. Ramaprasad Iyer, an employee of yours, I believe.' Iyer slammed his palms together in a *namaskaara*.

Pakhi shifted her look towards the old woman who slowly got up from the chair,

'This is Sister Marie, funny as it might sound, she is Shiuli's great grandmother.' Then Pakhi turned to the minister, 'everybody this is the great Jagannatha Varma, a true leader, a visionary, a revolutionary.'

Jagannatha forced a nervous smile at the remark.

'Do you recognize this woman, Mr. Varma?' asked Pakhi.

Jagannath Varma hesitated to reply and tried to look away.

'Perhaps you will recognize this,' Parosh added as he pushed his right hand into his jeans' pocket and pulled out a spectacular device wound by a shining chain. Parosh held the device loosely in front of the minister and let the chain unwind itself. The gold plated pocket watch's case unwrapped itself and swung like a pendulum in front of the minister one side and the old woman on the other.

'No?' Parosh pretended, 'maybe you will recognize this.' He said and snapped open the case. Out fell a shiny silver coin on the floor, new as ever.

The coin dropped and started spinning until it dropped on its head. Darkness loomed on its surface as the old woman moved forward to pick it up and cast her shadow on the mintage.

'*Shuvo mudro!*' she chanted recognizing the coin in her hand as the same one that she had given her husband six decades ago on the first night of their marriage as a token of good fortune. The doomed coin that only symbolized misfortune for the couple.

The minister stepped back and yelled, 'What kind of a joke is this?' he asked Pakhi angrily, 'Did you bring me here to waste my precious time?'

'Oh, is that what you did here, back in the past?' Pakhi asked threateningly.

'What kind of a show are you putting on?' He asked.

‘Be patient, the show has just began.’

Nissar had been a silent witness but slowly began to move away. Parosh noted it and generously announced, ‘Mr. Varma, the box is slipping. How long do you plan to keep the cat in the there?’

‘Why are you talking senselessly?’

‘You still have time to confess and accept it before we go ahead with a legal accusation. Either way you will have the same sentence, that of death, but at least you can die with a little less shame.’ Pakhi offered.

‘This man killed my husband.’ A trembling voice accused. Everyone looked at the old woman. Her eyes filled, with tears spoke of fury, ‘He is the visitor who killed my husband.’

‘Enough! I have had enough of this. I am getting out of here and will make sure that all you maniacs find ideal places behind bars.’ He turned around and began to leave.

‘We are on air, Mr. Varma.’ Parosh said, ‘not live, but definitely on air.’

He turned back and looked at Pakhi who smiled and winked at the minister and mockingly air-kissed him. He quickly threw a sharp glance at Parosh.

‘Yes Sir, it is inclusive of your heroics in the car with my sister.’ Parosh said and chuckled, ‘It is time to reveal the real identity of the cat, *Suryasena Varma*.’

The very name of the dreaded monster set the sea on a tidal depression. Even the bats in the room upstairs scurried out of the broken window in fear. Nissar thumped the minister’s back with his left hand and hid behind him. While the minister, Jagannatha Varma, sighed and looked down in embarrassment.

‘You little pests have figured out everything, haven’t you?’

Smiles grew across the young faces of Pakhi, Parosh and Shiuli. Iyer was numb and so was Sister Marie, Shiuli’s great grandmother.

‘And now you want me to confess everything on camera, where is it by the way?’

‘It’s right there where you were staring at all the time.’ Pakhi mentioned pushing the third button on her shirt. It looked a little different from the rest of the set. Clearly, it housed the hidden camera.

‘Hmmm... very well then, I think I am left with no other option.’ Varma started moving around the group of youngsters, he looked at the carved ceiling of the mansion and chanted ceremoniously,

‘Such is the great nature of a man, it resides the true face beneath a glittering masquerade. The true face is always the darker one but the world loves the shining mask. Ever wondered how it felt growing up in a closed mansion with a psychotic father who preyed on prostitutes and desperate women, ripping them apart with sheer brutality?’ He looked across the hall, then back at Shiuli, and started moving towards her. He continued, ‘I was a toddler, and my earliest memory of a father was a naked man drunk and urinating on a woman who was covered with blood.’

Shiuli closed her eyes in disgust, but the man did not stop describing the insane in front of that nine year old, ‘That would be one of the kindest scenes I had witnessed. Hardly your age, I found the first dead woman in my room and a grizzly old man atop of her. Is not that the pleasant gift for a child’s birthday?’ He asked.

His disturbing revelations brought with it a sense of guilt in the minds of the ones who had staged the play; Parosh and Pakhi. Pakhi went next to her niece and covered the girl's ears with her hand.

'You wanted to listen and now you cover her ears? She is not a baby; she must know how cruel life can be.' The minister spoke through clenched teeth.

The journalist brushed aside her guilty conscience and asked him to continue.

'I loathed the man, but he loved me, and he gave me whatever I asked for except a social life. I asked for water, he gave me wine. I asked for love, he gave me lusty charades. I asked for a father and he gave me an insane monster. Parosh,' he eyed the writer and asked, 'I am sure that you are a great father to your child. At least, she knows who her mother is. I do not even know who my mother was, whether she lived or died. They say she jumped into the sea after leaving me at his doorstep.' His eyes were getting dewy, 'I hated him for what he did for I did not understand why he did what he did.'

He stopped near Iyer and recalled, 'Then one day, I asked him about my mother. He called my mother a whore, a word so doomed, no son could stand to hear that about his mother. Do you know how I responded?' He looked around expecting someone to make a wild guess, but everyone was blankly listening to him. He smiled wickedly and revealed, 'I poisoned him and the whore he was with that night.' He burst out into laughter that was straight from the gates of hell. Thunderous monsters joined him from outside.

The shocking revelation and the laughter made everyone in the hall tremble with fear.

'Yo...You k...k...killed Mri...Mrityunjaya Thampuran?' Iyer asked stammering through the words.

The old man suddenly seemed to have gained ounces of extra energy. He was not human anymore; he seemed like Satan. The old woman folded her hands and channelled her fury to a prayer to the Lord.

'The next morning a man came to my rescue, my stepbrother. Older to me by over twenty years, he vowed to raise me up with his own son, as his son. Chandrasena Varma had drilled a hole in his own ship by inviting me to live with him. He was a nice man all right, but his son and wife treated me worse than my own father did. The young Jagannatha Varma, or Jagan, hated the fact that he had to share his space, royalty and face with a bastard son of a prostitute. I was his step-uncle but we looked like twin brothers, Jagan and me, except that he was glamorous and sociable, and had one brown mark on the side of his forehead. In addition, yes, of course, he was a limping bastard; he had broken his knee when he was seven.

'We were sent to a boarding school two years later, I dreamt of starting my life afresh. However, that rascal robbed me of my dignity before it could even hatch itself. He made my life a living hell. At school he revealed my background and nobody wanted to come near me. Jagan crushed my hopes of starting a new life. One day, I gave him the same poison, which I had used on my father, chased him to the lake with a butcher's knife, and pushed him into the water after tying his leg to a boulder. He never came up and I peeled off a piece of my forehead and underlying muscles, the same area where Jagan had the birthmark. I became Jagannatha Varma, and for the world the little bastard called Suryasena Varma had drowned

and died.’ He said standing near one of the lanterns that lit the room. The etched skin on the side of forehead seemed to glow under the yellow light of the lantern.

He walked over to the glamorous reporter and pinched her lips between his thumb and the index finger, ‘And then I started getting urges I could not explain. Chandrasena Varma took me to that psychiatrist and the middle-aged birdie told me that I had hit puberty and witnessing the death of Suryasena played a negative state of mind during this period. The highly qualified bitch did not even suspect that I was the real Suryasena and all I wanted was flesh. The first time I held my genital in my hand, I realized why my father was addicted to what he did...’

Pakhi pressed her palms harder over Shiuli’s ears so that none of the obscenity went into the mind of that young girl.

The antagonist continued, ‘...The moment I realized that, no matter what, I had the same bloody red blood of the pervert running through my veins. My father never came back from the dead, it was I who came back to the mansion on nights I felt the urge. I realized that I was bestowed with great physical power and used it against weaker women. Initially, I lured them to the mansion by acting as a lost child who was scared to go home alone up the cliff.’

Pakhi slithered in pain but he only tightened his grip and continued speaking, ‘Women, I realized with time, were emotional fools. They believed the crocodile tears of the devil. Yes, I molested them till they died or killed themselves because in every woman I was seeing my conquest as well as my mother. I hated my mother for she had left me at the doorstep of a mad man, and ended her life like a coward.’ He let go off Pakhi’s lips.

‘None of the women I lured defended themselves. They just surrendered, and I never saw revolt in their eyes. They were tamed and beaten already, and I only relieved them of their miserable lives. I bought such women for lump sums of gold as their husbands and children happily let go off them. What good is a mother if her own daughter sells her off for a few shining coins of gold. Yes, dears, those women were already dead emotionally when they were brought here. I just let them die with pleasure. I even did that psychiatrist of mine, purely out of fantasy. A disgusting woman she had been, cheating on her husband with a fellow psychiatrist. I always waited for the full moon, so that people would believe it was a supernatural occurring following the pattern started by my deceased father.’

It took the derailed old man three seconds to dodge sideward and step in front of the old woman who held on to the power vested in her prayers. Varma raised his eyebrow and nodded his head, then he stated in a grand tone,

‘This went on until that night in December 1948. I had learnt that the mansion found new tenants in an over-boasting Englishman and a beautiful Indian wife. I skipped my university in Madras and steamed all the way to the mansion to feast on the prey that had itself approached the wolf’s lair.

‘I waited for the full moon, just to keep the tradition alive, and on the evening of Pournami I went in stealthily through the back door and hid in the cellar. I was surprised to see the cellar full of live fireflies stored in glass jars, I picked one jar and unscrewed its lid, releasing hundreds of tiny fireflies out of the jar and one of them accidentally flew into my eye and I dropped the jar involuntarily on the ground. The sound of the shattering jar caught the attention of the Englishman. He followed the sound and came down. I hid myself in the

darker side of the cellar holding my breath so that the Englishman would not see me. The presence of the fireflies also overtly fascinated the Englishman and I took my chance, carefully slid along the darker side, got out of the cellar, shutting the only entrance with the solid brass bolt, and went in search of the woman.

‘The noise from the attic had already alerted the young wife of the Englishman. She was coming down the stairs in a pure white saree when my eyes first fell on her. I envied the Englishman, for he had the most beautiful creation of God reserved for him.’

He scared the old woman with his wicked breath, ‘Don’t you remember how you screamed when you saw me. The desperate Englishman kept knocking for all it was worth while I chased this woman who never gave in. When I finally caught hold of her, she was cursing me. She was not like the other women I had brought here. This one was a rebel. For the first time a woman did not surrender to me and instead rebelled against me. She did not give in; instead, she gave me a blow on the face and a kick to my groin. The next thing I knew was she picking up a bronze vase and hitting me hard on the head. I angrily chased her out of the mansion before I fell down, letting her go. She was beautiful, desirable as well as valorous.’

Pakhi swallowed her own saliva and looked at her Shiuli’s great grandmother helplessly. She was scared to death for she had a very bad feeling that this plan was going the wrong way.

Shiuli saw everything around, but did not hear anything as her ears were shut by her aunts freezing hands. There were fear in the eyes of all those who accompanied her. She was not scared, deep inside a voice kept saying to her:

Mr. Clifford will take care of you, my angel. He will never let you cry.

The insane minister noted the young girl.

‘When I see you, I am reminded of the woman who used to be like this. You have her eyes. The woman’s valor extinguished my lust temporarily but it only added fuel to the fire of my jealousy. How can God be so unjust? He gives pain, suffering, and a coward bitch to one man, and wealth and the most precious woman to another?’ He said as he moved towards Shiuli,

‘I went back inside, I smelled something burning from the cellar and upon opening the trapdoor, I found the burnt remains of the Englishman. He was way past dead. He smelled of barbeque and I lustily feasted on his roasted flesh.’ He chuckled aloud leaving everyone terrorized.

‘Yes, I remember very well, you faithless monster. I came back for my husband after sometime. I followed the noise and the smell from the cellar, and saw you feasting on my burnt husband’s flesh like a scavenger plucking the flesh out of its lifeless prey.’ The old woman disclosed in tears. ‘I saw you pop out my husband’s heart from his body and squeeze the blood out of it. No man can be capable of committing such heinous acts, only the devil can.’

‘And you chose to attack the devil again. Too much courage is just another form of foolhardiness.’ The minister addressed the old woman directly for the first time. ‘I pounced at you, tore off your blouse, but you slipped away from my bloody fingers and ran.’

‘I chose to end my life rather than surrender to a beast. Moreover, I had nobody else to live for; you had already killed my husband, the love of my life.’ The woman said proudly.

‘I chased you and on your way you hit me with that coin,’ he said pointing his finger to the coin that still lay on the floor. ‘Do you know where the coin hit me?’

Once again, silence with some rising disgust.

‘The coin hit my conscience. Your courage and self-esteem moved my ego and prejudices to such extent that for the first time in my doomed life I found respect for a woman. I keep this coin...’ he said picking up the coin, ‘...in your memory. I saw you jump off that cliff in an effort to be spared the insult of being touched by another man. I fell in love with you and I vowed to reform myself in order to lead a meaningful life with a purpose.’

‘It does not matter what you became later, because what you had already done will haunt you forever.’ The woman pronounced, ‘One cannot stay away from his inner demons for long.’

‘I went back to the university, joined the communist party, and started living for the welfare of the people.’ There was a sudden dip in the insanity in his voice. The minister now back to his sane self and spoke like a self-realized soul,

‘I started rising as a prominent political figure, but every time I came up, somebody would pull me down from the back. It is either a politically motivated terror attack or a spectral fraud involving my office. The dynasty never let me come up, and even now, the widow is conspiring something with her mute footmen as we speak. You are well aware of the political conspiracies against me, are you not, Pakhi Dutta?’

‘That was a great confession.’ Pakhi let out a long sigh.

‘Oh no dear, not at all. I am not finished yet.’ The minister said sadistically as he stepped behind Shiuli. He drew something from his kurta’s pocket and placed it right on the girl’s back. The crafty minister dug the tip of the pistol into the girl’s backbone. Nissar took out his handgun and stunned everyone by pointing it at the old woman. Once again, the minister smiled wickedly and said, ‘What you heard was the story of the visitor. What you are going to hear now is the confession.’ He smiled between sentences, ‘Be warned, nobody acts smart, nobody moves. I will pull the trigger and one by one all of you die, starting with this useless girl.’

‘Ayyo! Sir please do not kill me, these people blackmailed me to join them.’ Iyer pleaded, he jumped and landed at his employer’s feet.

‘Get away, you stupid moron or I will shoot you right away.’ He said and kicked Iyer on his face. The poor caretaker fell on his back and quietly sulked.

‘Now, where was I?’ Varma acted as if he was trying to recollect, ‘Oh! the confession part. You know, the problem with you youngsters these days is that you simply reach the conclusion as you believe you are all too smart. You make your plans and believe everything will follow according to them. However, you do not realize a possibility that you could actually be part of someone else’s master plan.’

Pakhi and Parosh looked at each other, and realized the meaning of the chilling remark that the minister had just made.

‘While you gallop thinking that you are the knight and queen, the unrealized fact is that that you are mere pawns.’ Varma added powerfully, ‘and pawns are meant to be played with baby steps.’

‘Mr. Varma, could you please let my daughter go, you can have me as your hostage.’ Parosh requested with his hands held up.

‘What is this? Some kind of a bank robbery or plane hijacking? No dear, this is an execution, and I am just throwing the ever-benevolent light of *knowledge* onto your pitiable little brains before I kill you one by one.’ He chuckled again to the tune of the raindrops pouring on the roof of the mansion.

‘You cannot kill us, this is being recorded.’ Pakhi threatened trembling.

‘You are not airing anything because I will shoot you in fifteen minutes. This thing never gets out of here. Now, stop wasting my time. Let me finish.’ The minister gestured his PA to cover him. Satisfied with Nissar’s position, he confessed,

‘I am an old man and this could be my last chance to attain the pinnacle of power, the prized post of the country’s Prime Minister. Hell, I should have *earned* it twenty-two years ago had it not been for the *self-triggered* assassination of the Congressman. Five years later, a bomb blast shakes my base. They pin my nationalist stance as *communally divisive* and I lose my support to a communal riot. However, not this time, I have worked hard to come up. I have sacrificed a lot and it is my right to claim the position that I deserve. I tried it the right way but never got it, so I decided to do it the crooked way.

‘It was you,’ he shifted his look towards Pakhi, ‘you gave me that perfect idea. You came to me and told me that your brother wanted to write my biography. What did you think? I’d just let an idiot like your brother write about me?’

He turned to Parosh and smirked, ‘You Parosh Dutta, what are you? You are an ill-talented writer who weaves barren porn after porn. You are nothing if you take away that dimple and business-minded head of yours. But you have a great fan following, though I do not understand how youngsters are enthralled and moved by your soft-porn chick lit. And fifty years in politics only taught me to be wise, to choose what suits one’s purpose. My purpose was to win the hearts of the youth of this country and how? By letting their favorite writer compile an all-praising biography.

‘Now, I needed you to write exactly what I wanted you to. I could not let you write just the good things. I wanted you to write some shocking revelations about my past. You thought all those medical reports were just lying there in the library waiting for you to discover them?’

Sir, you can use the library whenever you want. Suresh Gopi had said to Parosh the day he arrived at Varma’s palace.

‘It was all carefully planned. You were given hints constantly,’ Varma confessed looking at Pakhi, ‘I wonder what took you so long to suspect Nissar of being the informer. Of course, it had been him all this while.’

‘Even the assassination was a part of your plan?’ The appalled journalist queried.

‘Now, you are getting there quickly. You see, I had to feign an act of chivalry to bring the focus on all the conspiracies and somehow link it with a binding factor. A factor so

shocking that it would rub off all my sins in the eyes of the voters and immunize me with sympathy.'

'You confused us with the existence of a psychotic twin uncle who had been after your life ever since you were brought to live with him, when in fact it was actually you. You played that card so that in my book, I would reveal this and the world would believe that you were never responsible for all that you were accused of, and they'd believe it was a psycho relative who actually never existed. You would be portrayed as the victim who suffered at the hands of this virtual psycho silently so that he could work towards the welfare of his country. An automatic promotion to an overnight national hero.' Parosh deduced.

'You're a smart one.'

'Plus... plus, you have the convenient service of the ace journalist on your side to publicize your sorry state simultaneously creating waves across the news channels. Wow!'

'And now it's all over. I cannot trust you with this secret, so I am forced to kill you all. Hand me the tape or memory card holding the recorded content.'

Pakhi unstrapped a wire and pulled out a memory card from her mobile device.

The minister yelled, 'Nissar.' He gestured to his PA to collect the card.

Nissar took the card and the A/V recording unit from the journalist and pushed her against the wall.

'Good, now all of you, get down on your knees. The girl stays up with me,' Varma said as he pointed the pistol to the right side of Shiuli's head.

'Please, let her go. I promise you...' Parosh begged.

'Shut up!' Nissar punched his handgun's butt on his cheek, right where his dimple formed.

'Mr. Varma, I beg you...' said Pakhi.

'One more word from any of you and I will shoot her right away, do you want that?' Nissar warned.

'However, I am surprised. How did you figure out about me? Was it the coin? The reports were all fake and misleading, so no chance of that. Was it the limp?' He chuckled, 'But I am very curious to know how you found out about the woman. Especially someone whom I thought was dead, someone so inaccessible. How were you led to her? I am sure that Granny did not tell you the story of Grandpa's murder for bedtime, right, sweetie?' He asked Shiuli.

'Didima did not tell me that story.' Shiuli spoke slowly.

'Oh is it, then who did?'

'I did...' a glorious voice boomed in a British accent.

A bolt of lightning enlightened the entire sky and the shuddering clouds laughed out in chorus.

Varma felt a chill pass down through his nerves as he turned around to witness the specter of glowing whiteness right behind him. Varma lost his voice in the shock. Pakhi saw what she had expected and therefore relief struck her, which was soon to be followed by excitement, while Parosh and Iyer conjoined in fear. The old woman could not believe her eyes; she recognized the voice as well as the face beneath the lustrous glow.

‘Mr. Clifford, take him down.’ Shiuli exclaimed in joy.

Nissar loaded the gun and sneaked towards Shiuli to hold her at gunpoint when he felt his legs carried away into thin air. Within the matter of seconds, Nissar was hanging upside down from the roof, surrounded by glowing little creatures.

Shiuli waved at the magical fireflies.

‘Wha... what do... do you want?’ the tainted minister asked.

‘That...’ the ghost of Richard said claiming the silvery object in the minister’s hand, ‘...coin is mine.’

Varma loosened his hand and the ghost took away the coin.

‘You do not deserve this coin. You are an unworthy soul.’ The ghost’s tone was that of anger, hatred and vengeance. The sea rose in wrath and the rain blew an inferno of frozen vapor as the ghost lifted the minister by his collar and carried him outside through the entrance door.

The thunderous raindrops clapped against each other and pierced through the minister’s body.

‘You forced helpless women to take their lives; you showed dominance over the weak. You shameless swine. You call yourself worthy of a nationalistic cause. Go back in the past and visit the rhymes of Bhagat Singh and the likes.’ He bore his fist into the minister’s arm and it passed through the physical realms of his body. Varma cried in great pain.

‘Does it hurt? If it does, then you are a coward. If it didn’t then I will hurt you even more.’ The ghost stated.

‘Let me go!’ Varma pleaded.

‘Wrong answer!’ This time the ghost punched him on the other arm, ‘Come on, yes or no?’

The minister yelled in response. The ghost pushed him to the edge of the cliff in the rain, the minister froze.

The ghost raised its fist to punch in through Varma’s chest when the old woman rushed in to stop the ghost.

‘Please, I beg of you. Please, do not punish this sinner and be a sinner yourself. Let him be left to the law. The sinner’s fate shall be decided by God.’ The old woman requested. Drops of rain fell on her.

Richard’s ghost looked into the eyes of his wife. They were old but full of courage. But Richard knew more about God. He said, ‘Justice? Human justice is benevolent, my love; this swine deserves justice at the gates of hell.’

‘I thought you never believed in Hell?’

‘My dear, I never believed in things that I did not see. But I have seen life after death, and I believe in those that one would never believe in.’ the ghost spoke like a philosopher. ‘There are hundreds of blood thirsty souls awaiting his arrival here, I know of them for I have seen them there.’ He added, ‘I can see them now, waiting for me to strike the last blow.’

Thunder growled and the wild dogs howled. The dark clouds gobbled the only source of light, the moon.

‘You simply cannot do away with all the sins you committed in your life by turning into a new leaf. That thing called destiny is a strict auditor. It accounts for everything you do and that you deserve. You lived too long and mostly in power. Now you will face the darker side of the coin. *Every face has a darker side*, but it is the human who decides if he wishes to adorn that face or not, not destiny or fate. You had the chance, but you chose it late, too late. You face the charges of slaying women, promoting greed, bribing power and most of all, of separating two souls forever. Depending on fate or chance will only mislead one to the extremes, I am a perfect example.’

He raised his fist for the final blow when a furious Nissar came charging towards the ghost. Nissar, with the foolhardiness action, passed through the ghost and uncontrollably collided into the minister and the two of them rolled off the cliff and fell down on to the hard rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

The ghost and his living wife witnessed the fall from the edge of the cliff.

Upon hitting the rocks, Varma and Nissar died on the spot. Their death was followed by an outburst of crackling laughter of a hundred doomed souls that had been waiting this glorious day when their hunter would fall prey to his own trap.

‘God has His plans.’ The old woman, Lavanya, preached.

‘A man writes his own destiny and pays for his sins.’ The ghost pronounced.

Richard’s ghost looked at the woman whose wrinkled fair face garnered little droplets of rain. It reminded him of their youth, the first time they had danced in the rain together. Seventy winters ago, perhaps. Now, the rain started slowing down and the clouds shifted apart to reveal the shining lunar marvel, the moon.

‘What happened that night?’ The ghost asked eagerly.

‘I jumped into the sea; I thought I would end my life instead of giving my body to a man whom I did not love. However, when I woke up, I saw an angel; she was young and glorified by a lucent aura of the divine. I thought I was in heaven, but then I realized I had not died and that Sisters of Loreto had spotted my body floating in the sea on a shore to the north of this city. I did not have anywhere to go; I served the sisters during their stay in Kerala and found myself influenced by the preaching of the angel who saved me. She was a teacher, a friend, a mother and a benevolent giver who only knew to love selflessly. Under her guidance, I found my lost God. When I was preparing to join the sisters I learnt that I was three months pregnant with our child.’

‘Our child?’ the ghost asked with the zeal of a child.

‘Yes, a beautiful daughter.’ She revealed.

‘Like you?’

Lavanya chose to answer with an affirming smile for she did not want to reveal the sad truth that her daughter had passed away few years ago.

‘I needed more time and soon all of us moved back to Kolkata where the angel I told you about initiated a small diocesan congregation called Missionaries of Charity. We had just one purpose, to serve the poorest of the poor. I raised my daughter simultaneously as I served my cause. And after she got married to a fine gentleman, I joined the nuns as one of them. The angel, whom the world now knows as Mother Teresa, gave me the name Marie, because

she said that I reminded her of the courage and warmth symbolized by the mother of God.’ She paused to look at her husband’s face, a pleasant grin was evident. ‘I know you do not believe in God.’

‘I believe in you, my dear love...’ he said and heard Shiuli running towards them. Looking at the beautiful little girl, he realized that all this while he had been with his own great granddaughter. He said, ‘...and every once in a while, I like to believe in that thing called destiny.’

The rain had stopped completely and under the spell of bright moonlight, the young Shiuli looked exactly like her great grandmother, Lavanya, in her younger days. The ghost of Richard Baxter knelt down and held his kin by the arms. His eyes filled up.

‘Thank you Mr. Clifford.’ She said.

‘Do you know that, I am your great grandfather?’ He asked proudly.

The little girl nodded.

‘You look just like your great grandmother.’

‘So they say.’ She looked at Didima who was smiling back at her. She locked her gaze on the ghost and asked, ‘So I guess it is back to the stars then?’

‘I am so grateful to you and your aunt, dad,’ he glanced at the two, ‘and you too Mr. Iyer, sorry for troubling you with the chandelier.’ He said to Iyer who was yet to come out of the shock. ‘Nobody is going to bother you again. This house is free from ghastly visitors; it is the humans you better watch out for.’

‘Do you really have to leave?’ Shiuli asked

‘I am afraid my child, I have to. My purpose has been fulfilled and my soul is not needed on this planet anymore.’

‘I wish you could stay with us, with Didima.’ She said tearfully as he pressed her teddy into her tenderly blossoming bosom.

‘I want you to promise something. Please give this Mr. Clifford a place in your heart forever. And that Mr. Clifford,’ he said pointing at the teddy bear, ‘must be allotted a permanent place in your shelf. I know it means a lot to you, it reminds you of your mother but then you must realize that whatever happens, one must move on in life.’

He looked up at his wife, ‘Look at your great granny. She lost everything twice, but she never lost the courage to fight. She would have jumped into the pyre of her first husband had she been a coward, but she dared to take a risk and walked past the barriers of superstitions and into the life of a total stranger. Her courage was the one thing that made me fall in love with this woman. She fought against all odds.’ He said turning back to Shiuli,

‘I want you to be courageous. I am not sure how much the world has changed, but sadly, it is still governed by people who like to keep you under wraps. I want you to follow your heart and change that condition forever. Be a woman like your great grandmother.’

Shiuli nodded in agreement.

‘Is that a promise?’

‘Yes!’ Shiuli confirmed.

‘I am leaving a gift for you.’

‘Wow, what is it?’ the nine-year-old jumped up in excitement.

‘You’ll know, and time will tell. Be courageous and use it the right way, my darling.’ He said and gave a gentle peck on his granddaughter’s cheek and rose up.

Pakhi and Parosh also came closer.

‘Take care of my lovely child; do not make me come back again.’ Richard’s ghost warned Parosh and Pakhi jokingly. Shiuli chuckled softly and joined her father and aunt. Meanwhile, the ghost of Richard Baxter, who had started glowing again, inched closer to his living wife. Her eyes sparkled under the enhanced moonlight.

‘What is it?’ she asked, her voice quivered with age, but they were still as sweet as they were before.

‘The fireflies, I do not understand. What were they doing there in the cellar?’ Richard inquired rubbing his brow.

Lavanya skipped the look in his eyes and ran a smirk on her face.

‘Tell me.’ He pressed.

‘I was a student of arts. I discontinued my studies after my first marriage.’

‘Yes, you told me that, I can remember. But did not I ask you to continue your academic pursuits after marrying me?’

‘Yes, you did. When you were travelling across India between 1946 and 1948, I had developed a craze for the works of Caravaggio. It is believed that he used powder of dried fireflies to create photosensitive canvases. I wanted to try something similar, so I caught those fireflies, collected them in jars, and kept them in the cellar. However, I realize now, how wrong I had been. I did not have any right to keep those poor creatures captive. Maybe that is why God made me long for you this way.’

‘I think that God made you do that so that they could give me company while I was stuck in here for sixty-five years.’ He evinced his pleasure by smiling, and then he sighed and said, ‘I must go now,’ he said rising in the air, ‘would you like to come with me?’

‘Why do you give me more than one choice every time?’ she complained looking up at him, ‘It’s high time that you started making decisions for us.’ As she was speaking, she felt a tingling sensation in her stomach. She was being raised off the ground, surrounded cautiously by magical fireflies. She exclaimed, ‘Oh my God, they are...’

‘Yes, the fireflies that burned with me.’ He said taking her arms in his, he noticed that they had grown very old and weak, while his were still as strong as a young man’s.

‘I missed you a lot.’ Lavanya said dropping a tear from her left eye, and that was all she could shed.

‘Not any more, darling.’ The ghost wiped off the tear.

The two smiled at each other, and the scene touched the mortal spectators on the ground. Pakhi started having second thoughts about having a relationship again in her life. The ghost held his wife’s hand some fifteen feet above the ground, and the magical fireflies revolved around them keeping them from falling. If anything happened between the two, then it was the flow of pure love, the one that lasted forever and ever and the everafter. Lavanya closed her eyes, inched closer to her husband and kissed him on the lips. The ghost’s aura illuminated to a maximum and a blinding whiteness filled the night sky for a moment.

The light had gone away, so had the ghost and the fireflies. Everyone looked at the miracle in astonishment and then Shiuli saw her first and screamed in grief. Pakhi, Parosh and Iyer also saw and rushed towards her.

There it lay on the ground, right below where the extraordinary couple had been floating, the lifeless body of an aged woman whose courage and beauty was admired by many.

Shiuli burst into tears and so did Pakhi. Iyer touched the woman's feet. Parosh lifted his daughter up and put his arm around her. They all observed a minute of silence, praying for her soul's peace.

Lavanya Ghosh Baxter had at last found her husband, and Richard Baxter had found his wife, and in some world beyond the reach of the mortal, they lived happily ever after

Epilogue

Rajpath, New Delhi

29th December 2012

‘In the saddest of hours, early in the morning, a fighting woman lost her life to the physical torment inflicted upon her by beastly beings. The protestors are observing a mass silence right now. The death has not extinguished the fire but what you see is the calm before the storm. The youth has been shaken, questions have been raised, and it is justice that they seek. Meanwhile the young protestors are still waiting for their trusted leader, Jagannatha Varma, to comment on this critical situation. However, following his assassination attempt, the minister has gone underground. There are rumors that the country’s favorite prime ministerial candidate has committed suicide after losing his sanity. What has happened to Jagannatha Varma? That is another question waiting to be answered, with cameraman, Gobind Singh Kahlon; this is Pakhi Dutta for MANORMA 24X7 24x7.’ The journalist looked very tired as she unstrapped the lapel from her jacket’s collar. She passed it on to Gobind and moved to the back of her crew van.

She saw her niece, all dressed in black. She looked tired after the late night flight but insisted on accompanying her aunt to the protest. However, something else seemed to be bothering her.

Pakhi’s cellphone rang. It was her editor. She answered immediately, ‘Yes, Ma’am.’

‘Very touching lines.’ The woman praised in a thick voice.

‘Thank you. Ma’am’ Pakhi said.

‘Are you ready with the Jagannatha story?’ the editor asked without wasting a second.

Pakhi sighed and then tried to evade the question, ‘I... I need some time.’

‘You said you will be giving me an exclusive.’ The editor’s tone changed.

‘I did, but...’

‘Pakhi, I do not know what is wrong with you. You know how we work, don’t you? We cannot fall prey to emotions. Look at this rape incident, we projected it so sensationally that today the entire country is mourning a *person’s* death who was unknown to them previously.’ The editor paused and then said emphasizing, ‘Our ratings have shot up like a rocket. We need such stories, and we make epics out of such stories. Emotions need not be involved. We make Heroes out of Nobodies!’

Pakhi looked at the young men and women who had come all the way from cities and towns, far and near, in support of an innocent soul, protesting against the feeble status of womanhood, and seeking justice for the harmed and unarmed. In addition, here was a recognized personality, awarded with the fourth highest civilian award, above all a woman herself, brushing aside basic human emotions to sustain a brand value defined by hypocritical ethics.

‘Are you listening to me, Pakhi Dutta?’ the editor came in.

‘No... I am not.’

‘Ok, I am going to say this one more time then...’

Pakhi interrupted her boss, ‘No, I meant that I am not listening to you again, ever. I quit!’ and she hung up the phone. She took a decision that would affect her entire career, something she had been working so hard for all these years. However, she took courage as she remembered the words of Richard Baxter’s ghost.

Whatever happens, one must move on in life. He had said to Shiuli the night before when they were in Kerala. I want you to be courageous. I am not sure how much the world has changed, but sadly, it is still governed by people who like to keep you concealed. I want you to follow your heart and change that condition forever. Be a woman like your great grandmother.

Pakhi turned around but Shiuli was not standing where she had last seen her. It was a massive crowd and if lost, it would be difficult to find her. Of course, she was not a toddler anymore; she knew the place well and could find her way back home. Pakhi rowed through people looking for her niece. She asked a couple of people, but they had not seen the missing girl. Pakhi dialed Shiuli’s number on her cellphone, but her number could not connect. She pushed away a couple of boys in a desperate attempt to move through the crowd. Her eyes filled up. She moved out of the commotion to a sparsely filled area on the Rajpath. She sat down on a bench and started weeping.

‘Pishi?’ A soft voice called her from behind.

Pakhi’s face lit and she turned around. It was Shiuli.

‘Where had you disappeared?’ Pakhi asked with a motherly concern.

‘I was standing there, but I felt like someone was stalking me.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, and she kept staring at me, I mean like, wherever I looked she was there. She had wrapped herself with a black shawl.’

‘Was that why you looked so bothered then?’ Pakhi asked as she wiped away her tears.

‘Yes, so I followed her when you were on the phone. She led me to a deserted dead-end outside the protest area. She unveiled herself, she was beautiful and young, I think in her twenties, but weird.’ Shiuli recollected.

‘What did she do?’

‘She said that she needed my help and that only I could help her. I told her to go to the police or something if she was lost, but she insisted on taking my help and when I asked why she said,’ Shiuli said between breaths, ‘that I had a *gift*.’

Pakhi’s eyes widened.

‘She said she would come again to know my decision. I was feeling cold so I zipped up my jacket, but when I looked up again she was gone. She was weird but beautiful; she seemed familiar, as if I knew her in a distant way. I feel weird, Pishi and from her words I felt that she actually meant it when she said that she needed my help But how and who was *she*?’

‘You will know, and time will tell.’ Pakhi said. The journalist in Pakhi had already realized who *she* was and what *gift* she had mentioned.

I am leaving a gift for you. You will know, and time will tell. Be courageous and use it the right way, my darling, he had said before leaving.

She had the gift, and time shall test her courage and goodness.

Time shall carve her name in the boldest of letters – Shiuli Dutta.

Did you like the story of the Visitor? Don't forget to leave your review on Amazon.
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A part of my royalty earned will be used for the education of poverty ridden young girls in New Delhi, as part of a small initiative that I started earlier this year.

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