

TEMPER

VAKKANTHAM VAMSI



BLOOMSBURY

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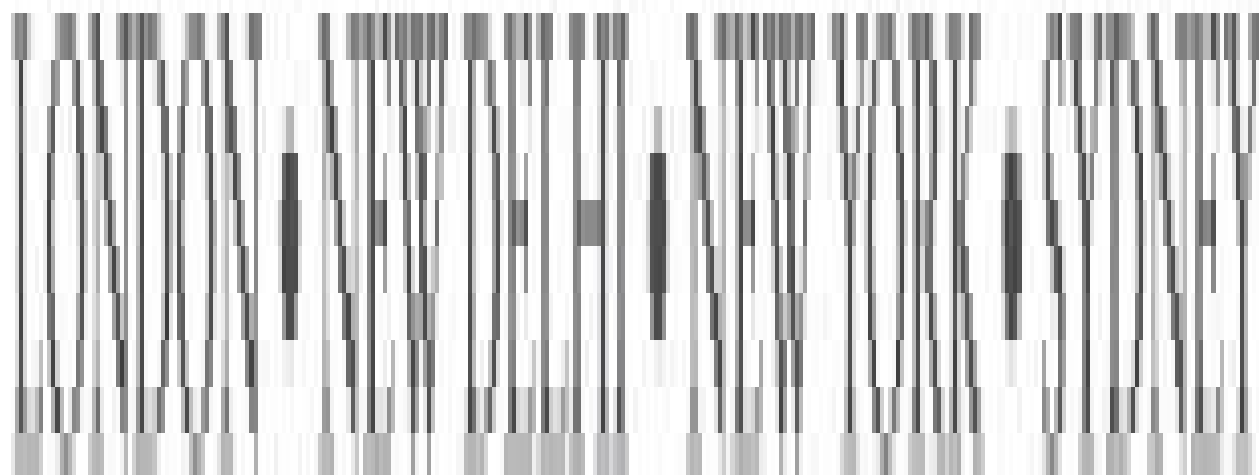
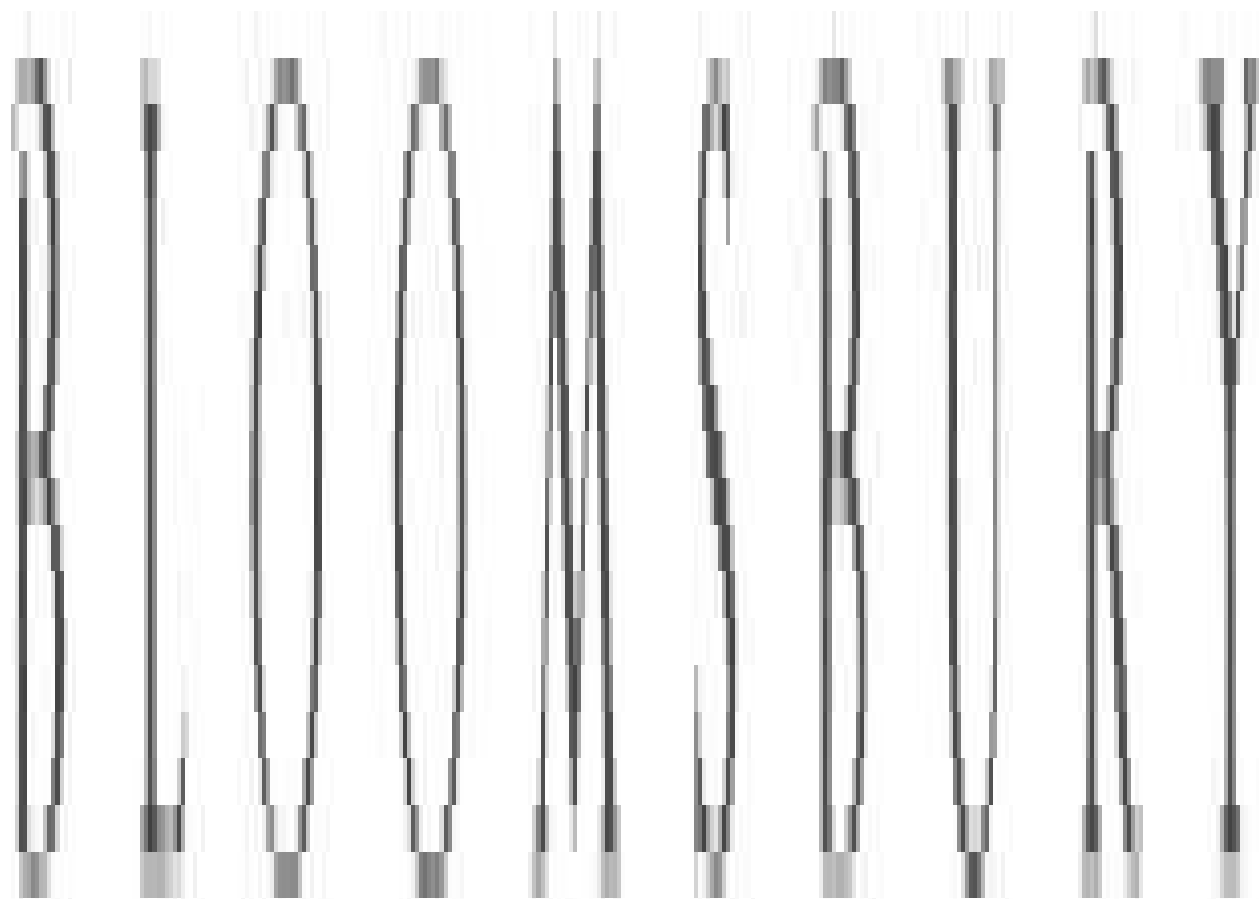


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By Vakkantham Vamsi



First published in India 2017

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E-ISBN 978-93-86606-08-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd

Second Floor, Building No.4

DDA Complex LSC, Pocket C – 6 & 7

Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110070

www.bloomsbury.com

Created by Manipal Digital Systems

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‘I dedicate Temper to all the heroic policemen in the world who have sacrificed their lives in defence of justice’.

Acknowledgement

Hyderabad

Monday, May 01, 2017

Temper is my dream come true.

I convey my heartfelt thanks to my father, Mr. V.S. Rao, who was the first reader of the manuscript. His appreciation and priceless advice fuelled my journey as a writer.

I first narrated the plot to Mr. Tarak (Jr. NTR). The Tollywood star shared my excitement and slipped effortlessly into Daya's character with much enthusiasm that matched my own. Thank you, my friend.

A big thanks to Mr. Puri Jagannadh, ace director. I will always treasure the beautiful moments we shared in the making of Temper.

I thank my publisher, Bloomsbury India, who shared my vision for Temper and took the book onto a global platform.

Thanks to Bloomsbury editorial team, for their efforts on the manuscript: you have sculpted Temper like a work of art.

Many thanks to Mr. Ravi, Art Director, who painted my profile portrait for the Author's Page, and Mr. Amit Bose, artist, for his striking cover portrayal of Jr. NTR as Daya for the film adaptation.

Thanks to Ms. Dipti Patel of WordFamous Literary Agents for representing Temper.

As I present Temper to my readers, it is my fondest hope that the world will empathize and fall in love with Daya, who is very close to my heart.

Foreword

While pondering about the subject that would suit NTR's intensity and image, Vakkantham Vamsi came with an interesting subject that is relevant to contemporary times. Temper film story has inspirations from deep connotations with several similar incidents that occur often in our country.

While scripting the subject we were sure about the protagonist's characterization but because NTR has a mass appeal, we were skeptical about the high-voltage intensity the subject has. However, NTR agreed to go ahead with the story and not worry about his image.

After filming and looking at the final output, I can't but think of any other actor who could have done justice to Daya's character.

I am proud to be a part of Temper and wholeheartedly appreciate Vamsi for showcasing such incidents and the aftermath of those events that eventually traumatize the affected families mentally and psychologically. And I am glad that NTR chose me to give the visuals to Vamsi's pen.

It's our way of bringing to the notice of the people, the atrocities carried out on women. At the end of the day, it is the police who will always help and save the society. I am sure this book will reach a pan-Indian audience.

We salute the police department and all their men striving day and night so that we could have a peaceful sleep every night.

A big applause to Vamsi for his commendable work as a writer. I love his work.
Looking forward to working with him again.

PURI JAGANNADH

Contents

[Acknowledgement](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

Chapter 1

On another busy party night in Vizag city, Daya was lying on the beach, drunk and bleeding. The light from the lighthouse swept equally over the boats, the nets, the drunkards, and every other object on the shore. The sea brushed the shore like it had been for thousands of years, completely indifferent to the presence of Daya. Close by there was an old ship that served little purpose now and hence was abandoned on the sea shore. It had lost all the intricate details and now had decaying old ribs. On one of these ribs lay a middle-aged man with long, curly hair and a bleeding face. There were six other men scattered around Daya. They were unconscious, all of them bleeding profusely.

After a few minutes of inadvertently listening to the waves, Daya slowly managed to get on his feet and rest against a huge anchor decorated with algae and he almost half sunk on the beach. He sat there wiping the blood on his face and spitting some of it from his mouth. An old man who had come to attend his nature's call was appalled by the scene on the beach and, realizing that Daya was the only man conscious, came to him and said, What happened to you, young man? There was no reply. The old man crouched next to Daya. He shook him by his shoulder and asked, Who beat you all up like this?

No one can run away from life, said Daya. It sucks the fun out of everybody. Unless it does so, we don't understand what life is. Daya stumbled up, stood and shook the dust off his clothes. The old man got up along with him and looked into his eyes curiously, expecting him to continue. This is not the first time someone has thrashed me. Looking into the old man's face for the first time in all this while, he said, It started way back in my childhood.

Daya vividly remembered the day when he was beaten up as a child by a police officer. He recalls the incident to the old man, who was patiently listening. As the police kept beating a young Daya with his belt, making marks across his

legs, shoulder and back, Daya spoke back aloud. Why are you beating me? The police officer, surprised at this, stopped beating him, bent down to reach Dayas face and said with false respect, Why shouldnt I beat you, sir? Without any fright, Daya replied, Do you know who I am? Do you know on whom you laid your hand? The sub-inspectors jaw dropped at the confidence of this young chap. He sat on a chair and sarcastically asked, Who are you, sir? Brushing aside the strands of hair that fell on his face, Daya replied, Johnny Bhai. Im right in the inner circles of Johnny Bhai.

Namaste, sir, said a man with a huge belly failingly tucked into a flowery shirt, the buttons of which were sure to give away if he moved a little too hard. Hearing this, the SI turned to look at the man as he removed his skullcap.

How are people at home, sir? said Johnny Bhai very casually. An enraged SI looked back at Daya and said, Is this the great Johnny Bhai you were talking about? Now keep looking here, dont move your eyes away. He dragged Johnny by his collar, made him stand right in front of Daya and thrashed him all over his body with a belt. Seems I shouldnt beat him because he is associated with you. On top of committing crimes, you blow your own trumpet, as if youre some kind of a star.

He pushed Johnnys face to the table close by, held it there and beat him on his back and neck. I can see how much you would have boasted about yourself. Otherwise this little boy wouldnt have dared to talk to me that rudely. As he kept beating him, Johnny cried, Please stop it, sir! He might have babbled some nonsense... and pushed three crumpled hundred-rupees notes into the officers hand. Why is the weight going down off late? asked the SI, shamelessly letting go of Johnny as soon as he felt the green paper inside his fist. Its gone down in the bank as well, sir. said Johnny, dragging Daya and the other boys out of the station. Dont tell them only about yourself. Once in a while, tell them about me too, said the SI dusting his hands.

Irrked, Johnny looked at Daya and asked him what he had told the SI. Daya, who had lost all his respect for Johnny by then, said with utter irreverence, All these years I thought you were some bigshot and thus, told him the same. But you! Instead of thrashing him, got flogged like a donkey. An embarrassed Johnny responded, How can I thrash him, you duffer? He is a policeman! Why cant you? You look and eat like a giant and still cant beat him just because he is a policeman? We loot the public and he loots us. Whats the difference? contemplated Daya vocally. The uniform, you idiot; we wear a poor excuse for clothes while he has khakis.

Daya turned back, looked at the police station and told Johnny, Im doomed if I continue working under you. Ill quit. And?, asked Johnny, curious of Dayas next venture. Ill don the khaki too. Ill become a Policeman, said Daya, walking away confidently. Johnny laid his hands on Dayas shoulders to stop him. Angered by this, Daya turned and look at Johnny and retorted, Do you know on whom you laid your hands? A would-be police officer. Back off! A shocked Johnny Bhai removed his hand in disbelief mixed with slight terror. Daya walked away from the police station, determined to become a cop soon.

From that moment, I set my sight on becoming an officer. I found that one has to hit the books to join the police force. But I only knew how to fight, Daya told the old man. I didnt have parents, so I had to work during the day to study in a night school. Daya soon realized that studies werent his cup of tea but he never wavered from the ambition of wanting to become a police officer and get an easy life. Do you know what you can do if youre a police officer? Daya asked the old man. Without waiting for an answer, he went on, A handful can be pocketed from a driver if they have no license. Half the loot can be seized from thieves. If two men brawl, you can exploit both of them. In a word, we can walk over almost anyone.

I used to watch cop movies while studying. And I practiced evil police dialogues from the movies as they came to aid in deceiving people sometimes. He enacted the dialogues of NT Rama Rao, Balakrishna and Nagarjuna as police officers.

The old man, who probably grew up watching these stars on screen, clapped and whistled for each of Dayas dialogues. With great effort, I could get through the tenth class., said Daya after the old man had settled down from the excitement. Graduation posed a real threat to Daya. At one point he almost quit, but all the scams in the country inspired him. He used to worry about not being part of it. He yearned to grow up fast, become a police officer and be a part of every scam.

Finally, by pulling a few strings, Daya bought his degree certificate. The only test I passed genuinely was the physical test. After all, who can beat me, a born thief, in running? My experience of jumping over the walls came to my aid then. Who can ever beat me in fitness? he told the old man. Finally owing to my good luck and to your bad luck, I became a sub-inspector.

Many months before Daya met this old man at the beach, the Vizag Police chased four men on the port, finally surrounding and arresting them. They were taken to the station and put behind the bars. Sir! Why did you arrest the brothers of Waltair Vasu?, asked a constable to the SI. Dont you know about his influence?

Enraged by the arrests, Waltair Vasu went to meet the Minister. He stepped out of his white Scorpio and walked hastily into the Ministers guest house. He was seated by the swimming pool in a lungi, cheerfully dangling his legs in the water and reading. He moved the Enadu newspaper to see Vasu standing at a distance with his men. Why are you standing there? Come here, said the Minister to Vasu. Why has God given us the sea? So that we can catch fish. When we go there, we cannot return empty handed. So, we get something in the boats. These fellows call it smuggling and harass our guys for doing it, said Vasu as he came close to the Minister and sat on a bench.

That stupid SI put my own brothers behind the bars. Its a childs play for me to kill him. But, if I do kill him, a stricter officer may fill his shoes. Thats not what I want. Transfer him and get someone who will dance to my tunes. That officer

shouldnt have qualities like morality or sincerity. In short, he should be worse than me.

After a moments thought, the Minister said, Its difficult to find a person worse than you, and he meant it as a compliment to Vasu. 'Thinking about it, I know one such person. He is in Hyderabad. He is bird of a different feather altogether, he added quickly as he was reminded of an officer, in a flash of memory.

Let me tell you what Im capable of. A Minister got me transferred from Hyderabad to Vizag. An officer who worked alongside the big shots was in great demand, and who should come to their mind other than me? said Daya to the old man. But before I left Hyderabad I had to finish things in style. And fates my partner-in-crime!

Just the day before I left Hyderabad, someone called me to inform there was an exchange of bullets. Two groups of gangsters were involved in gunfire. On getting the call, Daya rushed to the spot to nab them all and pocket as much money as he could. But by the time he reached the spot, they had already fled, except for one well-built bald man in jeans and an orange T-shirt. He started running once Daya got down from his police jeep. Daya chased him through the narrow lanes, through a steel workshop close by and as he almost got away, Daya took his revolver and shot him under the knees. Youre under arrest, said Daya to the bleeding man. Wondering how far away Daya was, he turned around to check if he could manage to run away. Daya, who already had his phone in his hand, captured the runners photo. Daya heard another man running away in the vicinity. He followed swiftly and cornered him in a couple of minutes. Daya aimed the gun at him and then saw it. It was Johnny Bhai.

Sir... sir... Please, Im not involved in it in any way. Let me go pleaded a visibly trembling Johnny. Then why did you run seeing me? Im afraid of the police, sir – Daya interrupted him, Johnny Bhai! This fear of police...this is what motivated me to become a officer myself. Johnny immediately recalled Daya as

a young boy, asserting that he would wear the khaki one day. Dude, is that you? Scared of how Daya would respond to this informal tone, he quickly added, Sorry sir, I didnt think you would join the police. Smirking at that, Daya asked, Who is that fellow who just ran away? I dont know. Daya pointed the gun at him to threaten him. I really dont know who he is. But I know who is dead: Suribabu.

What? Suribabu is dead? Where is the dead body? Take me there at once! demanded Daya. Johnny took him to the dead body, which was laying three streets away. A middle-aged man in a white chequered shirt and black pants was lying with his face on the ground. Thick, dark blood stained the ground around his face. So, Suribabu is dead. Whats his story? Daya asked Johnny. Puzzled that a police officer didnt know Suribabu, who was one of the most infamous thugs in Hyderabad, Johnny explained: He is Madhavs younger brother. Theres bad blood between his gang and Shakeels. Shakeel had tried to kill Suri in the past, but in vain. Now all of a sudden when someone has killed Suri, you are telling me that Shakeel and Madhav are at loggerheads? Daya reconfirmed. Johnny nodded. Get Shakeel on the line, ordered Daya.

Hello Shakeel. You dont need to know who I am. But Im standing right in front of the person who is really pissing you off. Shall I blow his brains out? I dont care who you are. But if you finish him off, Ill give you ten lakhs, said Shakeel. Ill be back in touch with you in half an hour. Keep watching the news, said Daya. He cut the call, giving the phone back to Johnny, who stood there, unable to believe what was happening. Call my station and inform them about the murder, said Daya to Johnny. Johnny, who did not comprehend what Daya was doing and what he was asking him to do, just went and made the call even as he was not clear about the plans. The police came and were clicking pictures of the dead body as Daya addressed the media: We have learned that the deceased is Suribabu. We are trying to find out who the culprit is. The killers were very cautious not to leave any clue behind. But well try our best to nab them.

Shakeel, overwhelmed, celebrated Suris death along with his men. He received a phone call from Daya. Are you happy?, asked an excited Shakeel asked, Who on

earth are you? I tried every trick in the book to kill him. You did it without any fuss. Tell me where I should send the cash. Or come to me. I really wish to see you once. Well meet when the time is ripe. Put the 10 lakhs in a red bag and leave it under table number three of the Red Rose Café.

Johnny Bhai and I went to the Red Rose café and got the bag, Daya told the old man. 10 without any effort?, asked the old man in awe. Wait, I havent finished yet. Didnt Shakeel want to see me? So I went to his house next. He was happily dancing there with his men, celebrating Suris death. The police jeep stopped outside Shakeels house, and Daya, along with Johnny Bhai went into the house. Police!, shouted Daya, kicking the door open. What happened, sir? Why are you here?, asked a scared Shakeel. Dont act smart. You think the police wont come if you commit a murder? Do we not know that you were the one behind Suribabus murder? We got our hands on the shooters phone. He made calls to you before and after the murder. You want to see the call list? said Daya as he threw the phone to Shakeel. Lots of people keep calling me, sir. You cannot blame me for all that, said Shakeel, trying to defend himself. I dont care who you are. But if you really finish him off, Ill give you ten lakhs. Red Rose Café, table number three. Isnt this what you told him? Is this enough or should I take you to the control room and play the whole conversation?, said Daya. What do you want me to do? Shall I arrest you or not? Promptly grasping what Daya was getting at, Shakeel said No, sir, firmly, with the relief that he was almost out of trouble. I gave him just one chance. He had to quote a figure to my liking and within seconds I left the place with twenty lakhs, Daya told the old man. Thirty lakhs in less than an hour?, asked the shocked old man. Yes. But isnt a round figure always better?, smirked Daya, winking at the old man.

I went to Madhavs house. As Daya stopped his police jeep outside, he could hear women crying. Johnny Bhai took him to Madhav and Daya brought him aside. I loved your brother very much, said Daya, aggravating Madhavs pain even more. He was not just a brother to me. I loved him like my own son. He was the apple of my eye, said Madhav. I have proof of who killed your brother. I will file a case with it. The government will give me a gold medal for it. said Daya, tempting Madhav to offer him a price. Sir, forget the gold medal, I will give you enough money to make yourself gold bricks, said Madhav, and arranged for

twenty lakhs on the spot.

See how I earned fifty lakhs in two hours without any pain? This is exactly why I wanted to become a police officer, Daya told the old man, who wasnt able to believe what he just heard. I gave Johnny Bhai five lakhs, and much to his disappointment told him I cant continue helping him at Hyderabad, since I was to be transferred to Vizag.

Chapter 2

As Murthy was garlanding Gandhis photo in the police station along with other constables on Gandhi Jayanti, a constable who just entered the station told him, Sir, dont salute just Gandhi today. Salute the new SI who is coming to Vizag. Also pray that Vizag should be saved by him. Murthy, with a clean-shaven face and the holy ash carefully applied in a horizontal line as though with a scale, turned around to make sense of what the constable was saying. Murthy said, What is that you are saying? Isnt he here to save Vizag?

The constable laughed loudly at Murthys ignorance and said, His name is Daya. You know what that means in Telugu? Mercy! But he lacks exactly that! Murthy looked at the constable with dejection, expecting him to go on. He is notoriously known as the Corruption King. He is the darling child of corruption. Murthy, an upright and sincere police officer, was filled with grief having to work under a rogue like this. In his lifetime he had worked under many of them, and all those experiences came back to haunt him like the ghosts of men with unfulfilled desires. As though the desires of the previous officers werent fulfilled, they had come back to plague his life in the form this new SI, thought Murthy.

A police jeep skidded its way in front of the station and Daya got down from the jeep, wearing blue jeans, his calves covered in thick brown leather boots that announced his arrival, long before one could see him, with a distinct sound against the ground. The casually chatting constables became alert, took their respective positions, tried without success to even out their crumpled shirts and hurriedly tucked them in. Venkat, a constable, quickly polished his dirty shoes on the back of his pants and assumed his position.

Dayas neatly trimmed hair and beard along with the perfectly tucked in shirt gave him with a handsome air, not very common with the big-bellied and untidy officers of the police department. Whistling an old song, he walked into the

newly cleaned police station stretching his hands and removing the black Ray-Ban sunglasses he wore. Murthy had the station cleaned the day before to celebrate Gandhi Jayanti. If only he knew it would become the hub of corruption, he would have left the station to the spiders.

As he stood, regretting the fact that he had the station cleaned right in time, the other constables saluted Daya and introduced themselves. Sattibabu, Nagaraju, Nair, David, Venkat, Basha, Raghu and Kiran yelled out their names as though they thought Daya was deaf. Daya was indifferent to all these constables and made the least attempt to register their names in his mind. Still whistling the song, he walked right in front of Murthy. Murthy, unlike the others, thought it a shame to salute a man like Daya whose body instead of blood was filled with corruption. With great self-control, he tried resisting the instinct which becomes a part of a policeman—the instinct to unconsciously salute a senior officer, whether one likes it or not. Whats your name?, shouted Daya, clearly enraged by the impertinence of Murthy. Narayana Murthy, sir. Louder!, Daya demanded. Murthy, clenching his fists to control the anger that filled him on becoming an institutional victim of Dayas undeserving pride, spoke his name aloud. Why didnt you salute me? asked Daya to clear his doubt. I sprained my hand sir, said Murthy. Daya smirked. Oh right! Fine, fine, no hurry. You can salute me when your hand is better,’ Daya said as he pulled a wooden chair close by with his foot and sat on it. Looking into the cell, Daya asked, Who are those innocent guys? Why are they here? They are not innocent sir. They are Waltair Vasus brothers. We arrested them this morning for smuggling goods on the boat. For a very long time they have been bringing goods into Vizag without a license. After months of tracking their activities and phone calls, we managed to surround them at the Vizag port this morning as they were trying to smuggle again, explained Murthy, with a sense of pride in having been successful in bringing the criminals to justice.

Open the cell, Murthy, let me have a closer look at them. But sir, they will run away if we open the cell. When Daya and Murthy are here, how will they run away?, Daya faked a sense of confidence.

After much insistence from Daya, Murthy opened the cell with a lot of reluctance. The entire station was calm and the creak of the prison door was the only thing they all heard. All the constables were watching silently what was unfolding. The puzzled guys slowly walked out looking at each other. They were trying to guess what was running through Dayas mind. Would he shoot us down and close the case by saying we were shot while trying to escape? Maybe we should just stay inside the cell, thought one of them.

As though Daya couldnt see what was happening, an anxious Murthy kept updating him on what was happening right in front of their eyes. Sir, the cell has been opened. Sir, they are coming out of the cell. Sir, they will run away.

Daya didnt trouble them. As they were stepping outside, he winked at them and shook his head. Having got their cue, all of them ran out of the police station much to the confusion of the officers there who still didnt understand Dayas scheme. On the very first day, Daya had let important criminals flee. Murthy was starting to understand what kind of a man Daya was. You were right Murthy. They run away when we open the cell. We should keep these kinds of people inside the cell and not let them out. Im new to this place, so you should have at least warned me sternly. I thought only the girls in Vizag are fast. You should have told me that the men are also fast. What do we do now? Daya asked with a triumphant smile on his face, having accomplished what he really wanted to.

How will you explain this to the higher officials? asked Daya to settle the formalities of the case and close it up forever. What will you write in your case book? A confused Murthy said, Sir, maybe we will tell them that the new SI asked us to open the door? Daya interrupts, How will you write my name? I have not even taken charge till now. I havent signed the register yet. What is your situation now? You know, you all risk losing your jobs for not producing them in the court after arresting them. Daya with a haughty smile walked around the constables, saying, Tell me, guys! What shall we do now? What will you write? You have let go of the smugglers. You will lose your jobs. Tell me something. He stood in front of David, who trembled at the imminent danger of losing his

job. Tell me, what will you write?

I don't know sir. Should I tell you even that? teased Daya. Just forget that they were arrested at all. Then where is the case?' Murthy promptly informed him: 'Sir, the case has been registered in the FIR.'

'What will you do if the FIR book gets burnt in a short-circuit, Murthy?' Saying this, Daya fixed his eyes on Sattibabu and shook his head as though asking him to perform the task. Sattibabu borrowed a lighter from Raghu and lit the book. Murthy tried to save a part of the book, so that it could be reported. As he used both his hands to put out the fire, an enraged Daya bellowed, 'You said you sprained your hand? But you are putting out the fire! Is it not immoral to lie on Gandhi's birthday, Murthy?' Murthy, who was a bit surprised at being caught, stopped his action and stood there, frozen.

Daya walked in front of him and ordered, 'Come on Murthy, salute me now!' The FIR was by then totally burnt as Murthy looks at Daya. Gathering enough courage to not give into the undeserved pride of Daya and to stand by his conviction, Murthy asserted, 'After getting to know who you are and after seeing you like this, my hand refuses to rise in respect of you, sir. It will not salute you, sir.' Taken aback by such disrespect, Daya took a close look at Murthy's hand clad in a full khaki sleeve from his fist, and slowly through the elbow up to his shoulder as though trying to hypnotize it, to bring it to his forehead.

Looking at the constables who stood there in their respective positions, Daya said, 'Now, where is the guest house of this guy Vasu?' 'Which Vasu, sir?' asked Murthy earnestly hoping it wouldn't be Waltair Vasu. 'Which other Vasu will I ask for, Murthy? Waltair Vasu!' Murthy was now convinced beyond doubt that Daya would be hell to deal with. Murthy took Daya in his police jeep. On the way, as Daya kept humming the old song, Murthy stopped the car at a signal. 'All these red signals are for the public, Murthy, not us! Start the car, get me to Vasu's guest house quickly', said Daya. Murthy, having no other option, obliged.

The jeep stopped in front of Vasu's house. The gates were opened to let the jeep into a majestic guesthouse, with sprawling land. The front side of the house had a well-maintained garden, with three gardeners trimming the outgrowths on the plants. A lady was watering the flowers close by with a hosepipe. Nearby, on a tree, a baby was sleeping in an old sari which turned into a swing, supposedly by the baby's mother. Murthy drove past all this and stopped the car near a swimming pool right in front of the house. Four men around the age of thirty were happily relaxing in the pool along with six bikini-clad women aged around 25. They were fairer than all the rowdies around, and were brought from Delhi as escorts to the rowdies working under Vasu. Daya winked at one of them as he got down from the jeep.

One of Vasu's men led him into the first floor where Vasu was seated on a bamboo swing hung from the ceiling, sipping lemonade. Daya chuckled at the clothes Vasu was wearing. A flowery t-shirt with three-fourth pants was rather too odd for a big-bellied rowdy of more than forty years of age, thought Daya. The old-fashioned sunglasses that Vasu was wearing only worsened Daya's situation. Approaching Vasu, he finally managed to control his laughter. The rowdy introduced Daya to Vasu. Vasu blew the puff he had in his mouth, put out the cigarette and hugged Daya. He smelt Daya with a very loud snuff by his neck. 'Why are you smelling me like that?' asked a curious and disgusted Daya, trying to move away from him the moment he let go. Laughing out loud, Vasu said, 'Your smell tells me who you are. It tells me what kind of a person you are.' 'Ah! So what kind of a person am I?' asked Daya. 'Your sweat smells of illegal money,' said Vasu winking at Daya. 'Bingo!' Looking around, Daya continued, 'Where are your brothers? They are nowhere to be seen!'

'Enjoy your meal while hot, fruit while ripe, and your damsel while young. If you delay, it will decay.', Vasu chuckled. 'Lads are feasting on a young lass. And hey, what will you take?', asked Vasu with an air of superiority and without a shade of respect for Daya. Daya, obviously enraged at this, said, 'How would you feel if I addressed you the same way, without respect?' Vasu, who was not used to being spoken to like this by a police officer or by an acquaintance, felt

his nerves burn. He was only used to being addressed with reverence and fear by the police, entourage and the general public; no one dared speak roughly to Vasu. Vasu said in a rough tone, 'The ego would be hurt.' Laughing, Daya said, 'For you your ego rests inside, but for me it is all around, everywhere! Like WiFi. One should only try to pamper it, not tamper with it.' Vasu was surprised at the ego of this new officer, and was reminded of how he himself was a decade ago. 'Brother is fine. But don't you dare address me informally,' added Daya.

'What will you take, brother?' said Vasu. His tone was Clearly sarcastic. 'A peg!' said Daya. Vasu's men, who were keenly listening to the whole conversation, without even being prompted by Vasu brought two glasses, handing one each to Vasu and Daya. They lifted the glasses to their union in Vizag. As they drank, Vasu showed Daya around the guest house. Halfway through, Vasu offered Murthy a drink, and Murthy, as though he had been offered something disgusting, shook his head and refused. 'He is like that, bro. Don't we need men like him to highlight how bad we are? Isn't black blacker when it's around white?' said Daya, and they both laughed at the sincerity of Murthy. 'You have come to Vizag on your birthday and on the very first day you did me a huge favour by letting my brothers free. As though that wasn't enough, you have come straight to my guest house to visit me and have also become my brother.' said Vasu, again adding the uncontrollable emphasis on brother. 'So I'm offering Sunny Leone as a birthday gift to you, Daya! Enjoy!', he said, taking him into a party hall at the guest house.

Daya was welcomed by a peppy number and disco lights flashing on everyone's face, making it difficult to discern one from the other. Close to twenty men were drinking and sitting on the comfortable cushions, another six snuffing cocaine while three were settled in a corner smoking weed. The men were too high to even roll a joint properly and were tripping on the flashing lights and the song being played. Daya was indifferent to all this, and his eyes moved swiftly around the hall trying to locate Sunny Leone. In the middle of the hall was a stage, four and a half feet above the ground. On it, a voluptuous young woman turned around. Her hair was soaked with sweat as she had been dancing to entertain these men of high status. Every time she moved her head in tune with the music, the hair that clung to her shoulders flew in the air sending across droplets of

sweat. Her back shone with different colours of the lights, and nothing except a thin string kept her bikini in place.

The knot caught the eyes of Daya, and it was as though they were pleading him to come release them like he released Vasu's brothers earlier. A shiny gown that she wore moved sideways along with her plum bottom, and Daya at once went to the stage. Not being able to resist the temptation, he turned her around to see her face. Much to his disappointment, it wasn't the queen of seduction all men drooled for and all women envied. 'This isn't Sunny Leone!', screamed Daya at Vasu to ensure that he heard him over the blaring music. 'This is Vizag's Sunny,' said Vasu as he laughed and took a bottle of beer from the table close by. As Daya turned to the young woman, he looked down tracing the strand of hair that ran from the neck through her cleavage. Further still she had a trim belly and a tattoo that adorned her. It was the tattoo of a snake that girdled her pierced belly button and moved into her skirt. Daya instantly realized this hourglass was no less than Sunny and ran his thumb across her lips that were accentuated by the pink colour she was wearing on them. Daya looked into her kohl-rimmed eyes and challenged her, 'You think you can match my steps?' He moved aside to perform a neat dance step. The nameless grace danced along and Daya was completely cheered up. He got down from the stage and went to Vasu.

Vasu took him to the bartender's table and signalled the number seven with his fingers. 'What? Seven more? I'm done. I can't take more!', said Daya. Vasu laughed and did not respond. The bartender took out seven bundles of cash in a polythene bag and handed it over to Vasu. 'You sure you can't take seven?' Vasu said as he chuckled. Daya cheekily scratched his hair and took the money. He walked straight to Murthy, who, appalled by the proceedings in the party hall, stood with his back to the hall trying to communicate with his goddess, asking her why all these evil things still happened in the world, and why she made no attempt to put an end to the activities of those rogues. 'Why are you looking outside the window when such a figure is setting the whole room on fire, Murthy?' said Daya, turning Murthy around to hand him the bundle Vasu just gave him. 'Keep this in the jeep, I'll take it later.' He added, 'Isn't this a nice guest house Murthy?' Murthy nodded. 'Haha! Then we will make it ours soon, don't worry.'

Vasu's brothers took Daya to a beachside flat in their white Scorpio. Daya entered the flat and the brothers showed him around. Vasu had grabbed the flat from a small-time businessman six years ago. Vasu sent him the photo and phone number of his wife and sent a message saying 'You want me to call her? Or will you call me?' Scared by what Vasu might do, the businessman gave his flat away to Vasu. The flat was decorated by fine woodwork and a rooftop garden. A gigantic teak door welcomed them inside. Thick leather sofas laid lazily on the ground floor. The tiles shone and Daya's boots made a clear, majestic sound on them. They climbed the staircase that crawled along the walls at one end of the waiting room. As they came to the first floor, one of the brothers told Daya, 'The bar has been fully loaded, sir, give us a call anytime and we will be here.' On the first floor there was a swimming pool whose waters now slowly ebbed, reflecting the moon. 'Enjoy yourself in the pool as well, sir. Nobody here will ask you, even if you roam naked,' said another guy as the rest laughed in agreement. 'Alright guys. I'll enjoy myself. You leave now.' said Daya.

A poor misfit, Murthy had assumed the pose of standing with his back to Daya and his friendly exchanges with Vasu's brothers, as though folding his hands behind his back and looking away would stop them. Daya told Murthy, 'You should have seen my talent from this morning. Doesn't it make you respect me? You still don't want to salute?' Murthy kept looking at the kids flipping around in a boat on the shore, trying to sleep, and stood still as though he didn't hear what Daya just said. 'About turn!' Daya commanded and Murthy obliged. 'Salute!' said Daya, but Murthy's hand was as still as the anchor on the shore. 'Salute!' Daya screamed a little louder. Murthy didn't budge.

'If you force me to salute and if by mistake this hand rises to salute you, I will chop it away, sir.', said Murthy looking at the hand as though to warn it. Daya found Murthy silly, and his convictions amusing. He loosened up a bit and walked close to Murthy whistling an old Telugu song as though his impertinence didn't affect him. He came close to Murthy, stopped and said, 'Murthy, I love music a lot. These hooligans don't seem to have an ear for music and haven't bought a music system for this flat. So, first thing tomorrow you need to buy me

a good music system.' 'Which brand, sir?' asked Murthy. 'Brand doesn't matter, Murthy! You saw how the girl was sexy despite her name not being Sunny Leone. What's in a name, Murthy? System! The system needs to be good. That is what matters to me.' 'Okay, sir!' 'Alright, you may go home now. Come meet me by ten tomorrow morning.' After Murthy left, Daya took a bottle of bottle from the fridge and sat on the couch, drinking it, not knowing when he fell asleep.

Chapter 3

‘But you see, there was a problem with the flat’ said Daya, looking at the old man. ‘Since it was on the beach, early in the morning a lot of people went there for jogging and walking. The cars and the bikes they rode there made a lot of noise. The rich are too impatient to wait, and honk as loud as they can, without any qualms about disturbing the sleep of the people residing there,’ he added. The old man asked, ‘Why would you say so? You got a flat for free and now you are already finding mistakes with it.’ ‘Stop that and listen. My life is going to take a completely different turn at this point.’, goes Murthy.

‘Early next morning I was woken up by one such car driver honking so loud even the gods would have been angered. I walked to my balcony to catch a glimpse of the scene there. Two drivers had gotten into a fight. The public, who had lives more boring than Indian movies, gathered around them to get some entertainment. The twenty-something girl in one of the cars was embarrassed by the fight and was asking her driver to leave it alone and return to the car. Beyond them on the shore, a few old people were walking along the waters in their jogging shoes. Old ladies, who carefully chose the colour of the blouse, the jewellery, even the colour of their bindis to make sure they match, didn’t think it odd to wear jogging shoes with their brightly coloured sarees.’

A twenty-something girl was standing on the shore wearing a yellow skirt and a denim top. Her loose hair was flying in tune with the breeze that blew from the sea through the girl to Daya and beyond. Daya almost felt like he could smell the girl from that far. He wanted to check out this girl, so he quickly brushed his teeth, drenched himself with perfume lest the girl found out he was drunk the whole night and hadn’t bathed yet. He rushed to the spot and saw the girl happily running her hands through the breeze and playing with her macaw. She was giving the macaw a small stick and asking it to hold the stick by its beak. ‘Your parrot is very nice,’ said Daya trying to start a conversation with the beautiful girl. ‘It’s not a parrot, it’s a macaw,’ said the girl innocently, not understanding what Daya was there for. ‘Really?’ asked Daya. The girl nodded. ‘But does it

know that we call it a macaw?', jested Daya. 'No.', she replied. 'You see, that's the problem. A fish doesn't know we call it a fish, a donkey doesn't know we call it a donkey,' said Daya trying to give himself with a philosophical air. 'True!', said the unsuspecting girl.

'What's the name?' asked Daya trying to move the conversation a notch up. 'Sanvi,' she said. 'Not the macaw's name, yours!' 'My name is Sanvi.' 'So what's her name, then?' said Daya, not knowing what to say next but desperate to keep the conversation going. 'It's not a she, it's a he', said Sanvi as she covered her mouth chuckling. 'His name is Bobby.', she added. 'He?' said Daya as though he was surprised. He continued, 'Now, I have a doubt. How do we find out if it's a he or a she? Does it have anything underneath?' Sanvi laughed, and said, 'They are not like us human beings. We need to perform DNA tests to find out whether it's a male or a female.' 'But how do they find out among themselves?', asked Daya, now out of curiosity. 'It is natural for them. As they see the opposite sex they automatically get attracted towards each other. As soon as the male sees the female, it will come to it,' explained Sanvi. 'Ah! Just like us!', exclaimed Daya, hoping Sanvi would catch the signal. But, being the innocent girl that she was, she only said, 'Yeah!'

Now that these lines were exchanged, Daya wanted to take photos of Sanvi. He was too shy to ask for a selfie with a stranger so soon. So, he instead said, 'Can I take photos of your Bobby?' 'Sure, why not?', she said. Daya took pictures of Sanvi, laughing, playing with the bird, enjoying the breeze and making patterns on the sand with a stick. All the while she was unaware of being photographed by Daya. Daya, not satisfied with this, said, 'Let me click pictures of your Bobby from the back,' and went behind her. He took pictures of her from the back of the neck, the hair flying in the breeze and as he was about to click a picture of her, Sanvi turned around abruptly. In the nick of time she figured out what kind of guy Daya was.

'I'm Daya. Sub-inspector of police,' he introduced himself. 'Oh! So, you are a cop? I run a pet shop,' said Sanvi excited at having befriended a policeman.

‘Alright. We’ll meet here everyday?’, asked Daya in hoping to meet her there at the beach everyday. ‘I don’t come everyday,’ said Sanvi. Hiding his disappointment, Daya said ‘Fine then. We will meet whenever you come. Goodbye.’ He turned around and walked. He fought the temptation to turn around and look at her once again. Sanvi turned back to her Bobby and continued playing with him.

Walking away from Sanvi, he murmured to himself, ‘Wait, I’ll bring a female macaw. Bobby will come to her and you will come with him.’ By this time Murthy had come to report as instructed, with the music system in his hand and waiting at a distance for Daya to finish his romantic encounter. Daya walked up to him and said, ‘Forget all these music systems, Murthy. I have found my music system. This is the one.’ He pointed to Sanvi at a distance, who was now running to and fro along with the waves. ‘She runs a pet shop. Get me more details,’ he told Murthy as though all this was part of his job. ‘I know the details very well, sir. She is a nice girl, please leave her.’, said a worried Murthy. ‘Hey! What will I do Murthy? She is an animal-lover it seems. Who is an animal here other than me?’ said Daya, feeling proud at his word-play. ‘Go find the details and set her up with me, Murthy,’ ordered Daya. ‘But that is not my business, sir!’, said Murthy refusing to give up his self-respect at any point in time. ‘But that is exactly my business, Murthy.’, laughed Daya.

Daya and Murthy left the beach in the police jeep and headed towards the station. On the way, around eight women had gathered near the junction and were beating up two men. Daya asked Murthy to stop the jeep and both of them got out. As they went near the women, one of them looked at Daya and said, ‘Thank god you have come here at the right time.’ ‘Why? What happened?’ asked an indifferent Daya wanting to get done with their story soon and dispense with his duty. ‘These two rascals snatched her chain when she came here to sell vegetables.’, she said pointing at a vegetable vendor close by who stood there crying, and at the same time fuming with anger. Turning back to Daya, she said, ‘Because of rascals like these, we women can’t come out in the streets to sell vegetables and take care of our families.’ ‘Okay, okay! I will take care of it. Leave them to me. I will teach them the right lessons.’, Daya reassured them. The women thanked him and left the place.

Daya looked at the men from head to toe. One was dark, lanky and was wearing an old, shabby t-shirt whose print had worn off. The other was fair, short and stout. He was wearing three-fourth pants, a blue t-shirt and a denim overcoat that fit too tightly to his body. Daya slapped them hard as the women were walking away. They were curious about what Daya would do to the thieves. Daya slapped them again and relieved the women. 'We are very sorry, sir! We will not repeat it another time. We will quit robbing altogether. Please leave us this once. Show us some mercy!', they pleaded, almost unconsciously repeating the same dialogue they have said every other time the police caught them. Daya slapped them hard again. 'Why do you slap us, sir? Aren't we saying we will give up robbing?', said one of them. 'Why do you want to give up robbery? This is one of the few permanent jobs in the country. You are never out of season. You are rightly awarded for your diligence and corrected immediately and severely if you falter. You have no strict bosses and, like the call-centre jobs, you work by the night. Why do you want to give it up? Just think big, that is all I'm saying.' 'If we pocket nine times and get caught on the tenth instance, there is some sense. But we pocket a single time and get caught nine times. Our success rate is so poor, sir,' said one of them. 'That's why we are thinking of quitting the job, sir,' said the other. He continued, 'My name is Charles, his name is Sobhraj. We couldn't do justice to the great man's name and hence we decided to give up on the profession.'

'Why are you so depressed? You guys are very sensitive. Where do you put up?', asked Daya out of genuine concern. Charles responded 'Do we have a flat or a house or a duplex? How much did we earn to live in such places? We spend half of our lives here in the station itself.' 'I don't understand anything. I pity your condition,' said Daya, much to their surprise. Pointing towards their dirty clothes, he carried on, 'What are these torn vests? Have you guys eaten anything?' An emotional Sobhraj responded, 'What did you just ask, sir? Except you, nobody bothered to learn about us, sir. Every time they catch us they beat us black and blue and throw us out on the streets. Who is there for us to ask us these questions?', Charles patted him on the shoulder trying to pacify him. 'Hey! What are these words? Am I not there for you?', said Daya holding Sobhraj by his hand. 'You lacked proper guidance, and that's why you are like this. Let us go to my house. I will take care of you guys.'

Daya took them in his police jeep. Charles and Sobhraj, who were only used to being handcuffed, thrown in the back of the jeep and beaten up, felt like they had been promoted to the front seats. The people on the road who saw Charles and Sobhraj in the jeep were happy that the new SI is teaching these guys a lesson. They had been such a nuisance in the area; everyone abhorred them completely. They had been caught so many times that almost everyone in the area knew their faces very well, which only made it more difficult for them to steal. Now they looked at them all on the road and smirked. All these days whenever they were caught, they tried to bury their faces and hoped not be seen by the people outside. Now that they had won the sympathy of the new SI, they sat proudly in the jeep looking at them, laughing and raising their eyebrows at those who were staring at them. An emotional Sobhraj put his hand over Charles and told him all the difficulties of their past lives had come to an end, and that God has finally heard their prayers.

‘Where do you live, sir?’ asked Charles, like he would to a good acquaintance. ‘In a flat close to the beach. Currently its Vasu’s flat, but it will become mine.’, Daya said and winked at Charles who was looking at him through the mirror. ‘You mean Waltair Vasu?’, asked Sobhraj in surprise. Charles and Sobhraj exchanged a glance and nodded, conveying to each other that their lives were settled. They had just become close to the SI who was a friend of Waltair Vasu. For petty thieves like them, it meant a huge fortune for they were in the two most powerful circles of Vizag: one, the official and legal police department which enjoys the best privileges in the country along with unquestionable and unrestrained impunity; the other, that of Waltair Vasu’s, the most fearsome don of Vizag city. He ran all the major smuggling businesses: real estate (which in reality meant threatening people and appropriating their lands), and brothels, and had established close acquaintances with the major ministers of the state. Murthy drove the car completely disgusted at the things that Daya was doing each day. He felt depressed at being so powerless. All he could do was sigh.

The jeep stopped in front of Daya’s flat and they walked in. Charles and Sobhraj looked around in complete awe. ‘You live in such a nice flat, sir. We haven’t

been at these kinds of flats even with the intention of robbing. They all seem forever out of our bounds. And today you have welcomed us inside this flat. Thank you so much.’, said Sobhraj. Daya laughed and asked one of the workers there to get them food. On being brought chicken biriyani, Sobhraj fell on the feet of Daya and said ‘Sir, what good did we do to get someone like you!’ ‘Haha! It’s not the good things that we do that bring us fortune. It’s the smart things, and sometimes by chance that we come across people and situations that turn our lives upside down, just as how I was transferred to Vizag and happened to be on the same road as you today when you were getting beaten up. Don’t think of all that now. Just eat!’, said Daya and opened the fridge to take a bottle of beer out and poured it out for the three of them. He provokingly offered the bottle to Murthy who was standing close by. Murthy by now had lost all respect for Daya and wasn’t making any attempts to hide his disgust and irreverence towards him. The fact that Daya didn’t seem to mind this gave Murthy the license to be as condescending as he could. ‘He is the black sheep among us,’ said Daya to the thieves. ‘He is a witness to all the atrocities that I commit.’

Once they had eaten, Daya took them to a bedroom close by. The room had mosaic flooring, fine cupboards made of imported wood with intricate designs carved onto them. In the middle of the room was a double bed with a fluffy mattress. On the left wall was an air conditioner cooling the room. The ceiling had some clouds and stars painted on them. ‘What is this?’, asked a curious Sobhraj. ‘It’s a painting, made from an imported variety of paint. It absorbs the natural light, and the light from the tube light. At night when it is dark, it starts emitting the light it has absorbed. It feels as though you are sleeping under the open sky even in this air-conditioned room,’ explained Daya. ‘Aaah!’ wondered Sobhraj, excited at the pleasures their room had hid for them. To the left of the bed was a table covered with an embroidered cloth. On it was a phone that looked like an old ironing box. Charles went straight to it saying ‘Everything in the flat is so modern, so why do you have this old thing? Do you often get coal to press your clothes with this? Why don’t you buy an electric one?’ As he tried lifting the iron box by its handle, the handle and the lid came off, taking him by surprise. Instead of coal, there were buttons inside it with numbers imprinted on them. ‘Whoa! What is this!’, he exclaimed. ‘A telephone that looks like an iron box? Money can produce anything, can’t it?’ To the right of the bed, there was a huge window with a design resembling a dragon. It was covered with a curtain that Sobhraj pulled to and fro and played with. Opposite the bed, right next to

the cupboard, was a refrigerator with double doors. Charles and Sobhraj had settled on the bed by now and were slightly jumping, enjoying its fluffiness.

Daya stood next to the fridge and opened its door. Charles dropped his jaws. The fridge was filled with imported liquor. There were five bottles in the lower rung and tin cans in the upper rung. The upper door opened to trays of ice cubes. The fridge had fruits and a variety of pickles. It was any drunkard's dream possession. 'All this is yours. Have as much as you want. Let me know if you want more, I'll get it for you guys. After all it is Waltair Vasu's money!', said Daya. 'But why would you do all this for us? We are truly grateful but a little surprised too,' said Sobhraj, voicing out what Charles had been thinking all the while, yet was reluctant to ask.

'When I was a kid, I also used to be a thief. Back then I had a very bad guru. All he did was take a part of our loot. There was no use in giving it to him; he wouldn't save us from the police if we got caught. He never taught us tricks that would make us better thieves. If only he did all that, today I would be a big don like Waltair Vasu. Since I wasn't fortunate enough to get proper guidance to excel at robbery, I became a police officer. Now I indulge in safer robbery. I see my younger self in you guys. That is why I have taken you under my wings.', said Daya. 'Ah! It makes sense now. We are indebted to you, guru,' said Charles, acknowledging Daya's efforts.

Deep down he still retained the instinctual scepticism a thief has towards a police. He did not wave away his gut feeling, which told him that as beautiful as all this feels, it might yet be a trap. 'But what kind of trap could this be?', he thought out aloud as Daya had left and Sobhraj was going to the fridge. 'Hey! Are you mad? He has given us so much and you doubt him? Keep your mouth shut. If he hears that he might kick us out.', said Sobhraj, irritated at the way Charles was thinking. 'What if he has other plans? Is he trying to get some vital details from us?', said Charles, who wasn't dissuaded by what Sobhraj told him. 'Haha! In any case, we don't have any details. We aren't even acquainted with the other thieves here. There is nothing that we need to be scared of. So even if it is

a trap, let us enjoy it as much as we can, before he kicks us out after finding out we are useless,' said Sobhraj, laughing. 'Haha! True, true! ', he acknowledged, and took the beer bottle that Sobhraj handed him.

'Turn the AC on,' pleaded Charles. 'The chicken biriyani and alcohol is starting to work. Let's have a sound sleep. Have we ever slept in an air-conditioned room?' Sobhraj struggled to turn the AC on, but Daya came in at the right moment. 'Sleep well, I have my routine rounds to make around the city. I will come back by the evening. If you are hungry, tell the cook what you want, and he will make it for you.' 'Sure! Have a good day, sir!', said Charles as Daya closed the door.

That night, Daya came home after his usual official loot. As though all this wasn't enough, he had taken two more thieves under his tutelage. He had planned everything in his mind: he only had to tell Charles and Sobhraj about his idea. On entering the house he found that they were still asleep, and learnt from the servants that they hadn't woken up even for a meal. Daya woke them up and asked them to get ready to go out for dinner. The thieves thought he meant dinner at home, and got ready. To their complete surprise as they left the room, Daya asked them to get into the car and took them to the nearby restaurant. Charles and Sobhraj, who hadn't had food in any of these places all their life, ordered some food after much trouble. They were overwhelmed by his altruism.

While they were eating, Daya said, 'You know, nothing is free in this world.' Sobhraj was trying to make sense of this rather vague statement. As he was wondering why Daya said this out of nowhere, Charles nodded his head knowing perfectly what would follow. 'We work together as politicians and businessmen do. To the outside world, I seem like someone who is working to put an end to the atrocities committed by people like you, working for the safety of the general public. But among ourselves, we know what we mean to each other, how dependent we are on each other, and how we conspire against the world just so that we might live lavishly.' Sobhraj, who now understood what Daya meant, was excited by what he was saying. Encouraged by their positive

response, Daya continued, ‘So let’s make a deal. You guys can stay at my flat, use all the luxuries, and during the night indulge in well-planned burglaries. Not the small-time ones you have been doing all these years, stealing from school children, pick-pocketing, chain-snatching, and so on. But bigger hauls, like getting into a rich bungalow, carefully taking posh cars and bikes from parking lots, kidnapping kids, and demanding money from their parents and the like. This requires a lot of homework, and that is exactly where my flat comes in. You get to use the comfort and silence to relax and prepare, to ensure the loot is a success and not to leave any traces behind. But as it is common for any human being, you will make a few stupid mistakes and that will get you into trouble. I will use my power to save you from these troubles. We shall divide the loot 50-50 and live good lives for as long as we can, and if I’m transferred to a better post, we will part ways.’

Charles and Sobhraj who, all this while, felt happy for the treatment they got in his flat, were now overcome by ecstasy. Daya had just offered to extend the impunity he enjoys to two petty thieves like them. Now they don’t have to risk their lives to indulge in petty thefts, and can instead commit big-time loots with the complete protection by a policeman. The magnificence of the offer was slowly engulfing them and they readily agreed. ‘We would never miss such a golden opportunity, sir. Though this is more like a business deal—where you have your share of the loot—and not a charity, still we are indebted to you. Even with six months of this kind of a conducive atmosphere to work in, we would be settled for life.’, said Charles as he looked at Sobhraj. Sobhraj nodded his head in agreement.

‘Okay then. Great!’, said Daya intending to move on to the assignment he had in mind. ‘They say you shouldn’t postpone good things. Shall we start right away?’ An excited Charles said ‘Yes, sir! Order us and we will do it.’ ‘You guys know Sanvi? The girl who runs a pet shop?’, asked Daya. ‘Who tells us the name and other details, sir? Not like we need them also. Anyway, there was this once when we tried looting her place. With great effort we jumped into her house. Seeing all the tall walls we presumed it would be the house of some rich folks. Only after we were in the house did we realize that she did not have much with her: her only possessions were stray dogs. She had over 20 of them. We went into the

house, since all of them were conveniently locked inside the kennels. They were so sure of not having any valuables to lose that they did not even close their doors. The bureau was very disappointing. There was nothing worth taking from there so we just went into the kitchen and ate the brinjal curry that was left over. That was the best thing there: they make amazing food. Other than that they are pretty useless.’, said Charles.

‘Then steal the dogs,’ said Daya. They looked puzzled and clueless as to why he was saying this. ‘But sir, they are not even foreign breeds. Even if we steal them, we can’t sell them and make money. They are pretty useless strays.’, said Sobhraj. ‘You were also useless strays, loitering on the streets doing nothing useful and not worth a penny, right? But now that you are in my hands, are you not going to be worth so much more? It’s the same with Sanvi’s dogs. So shut up, stop asking questions and bring me the dogs tomorrow morning, and then you will see how with my Midas touch, I will make them agents of fortune.’, said an irritated Daya. Looking at his visible annoyance, Sobhraj responded, ‘Sure, sir. We will do as you say. After we go back home, we will plan the burglary in a few hours and execute it with utmost perfection. Please don’t get impatient with us.’ A contented Daya paid the bill and took them back home, not talking to them at all on the way.

Chapter 4

Charles and Sobhraj took the R15 that Daya had permitted them to use. That was a bike, which Daya confiscated from a thief, and had been using until then. The number plate on the bike was still the same, so Daya said they could use it for their robberies.

After parking the bike outside Sanvi's house, they put on their masks and gloves. They jumped over the wall to find an enormous number of birds and animals. To the left of Sobhraj was a huge kennel that housed seven dogs. The mother, who had just given birth to six puppies, was sleeping as they suckled on her teats for milk. The food kept for them in the kennel and was stinking. Next to the kennel was a cage with thirteen pairs of lovebirds. Nine small pots were tied to the walls of the cage, and four swings were hung from its ceiling. Three bottles cut into vessels were attached on the sides. Bird feed was placed in these, with similarly cut bottles for water. A few of them were sitting on the swing; others further populated the cage. Charles moved a few steps forward and stumbled upon a small cage placed on the ground. In it were three hamsters, which were screeching now that they had been kicked and hurt. 'Don't wake them up you idiot!', hushed Sobhraj.

As they walked further, they saw more cages with pigeons, macaws and parrots. They kept going, looking for the dogs. The street dogs, they were sure, were the kind that kept barking but would never harm you. So they could take them away, they thought.

As they arrived at the end of this vast stretch of cages, they heard loud barking. They were certain they had hit their treasure and readied their sacks to capture the dogs. In no time, the dogs came running and cornered both of them. To their shock, one of the dogs pounced on Charles and bit onto his arm. 'What do we do now?', asked a completely terrified Sobhraj. 'There is no other way to survive

but to become dogs when you are around dogs.’, replied Charles. ‘Eh?’ ‘Bite them off!’ said Charles, jumping on one of the dogs before forcing it inside the sack.

The old man, irritated at this, asked Daya, ‘You think I’m a fool to believe all that? Two men go to steal a bunch of stray dogs! They start biting the dogs, and eventually bring them to your flat? What nonsense!’ Daya, not at all surprised by unrealistic turns of events, said calmly, ‘It’s a privilege to have everything run so smoothly in life that it seems realistic. Thieves like them and I needed to experience these unrealistic things to get where we are today. It’s a lie that has to sound realistic for you build around it a semblance of truth, but truth has no rule to follow. It just happens and you deal with it.’ The old man just stared at him as though he had bought the argument. He wanted Daya to go on.

‘That very night, they brought home the dogs, left them in a room in my flat, and went to bed. I had one of my servants give them food at the right times and take care of them, for they were my only way to Sanvi’s heart.’ After he instructed the servant to take good care of the dogs and, more importantly, made sure that no one else came to know that these many dogs had spontaneously appeared in his flat, he left for his station.

As Daya had expected and wished, Sanvi had already come to meet him and lodge a complaint. He parked his jeep outside and walked in to meet a crying Sanvi with her mother. As though he had no idea what had happened, Daya asked, ‘What is it Sanvi? Why are you crying like this? First stop crying and tell me what is the matter.’ He took her from the bench at the entrance where she was sitting and they went into his office cabin. He made her sit and gestured for her mother to do the same. Her mother was dressed fashionably in a bright coloured churidaar with her hair loose. She had fair skin, and her red lipstick made her look a decade younger than she actually was. ‘This is my mother,’ said Sanvi, wiping her tears with the end of her dupatta. ‘Namaste.’, said Daya bringing his palms together. Sanvi’s mother smiled and responded the same way. Daya offered Sanvi a glass of water.

Sanvi's mother looked around the room while she sat next to her. Behind Daya was a big photo of Gandhi smiling, as though at her. To the left was a huge rack with numerous files. They had visibly been ignored for a very long time, for they were all coated with a thick layer of dust. The last time they were cleaned was during the Ayudha Puja. Even when Murthy had the office cleaned the day before Daya took charge, these files weren't touched. That's how important they held them to be. To the right of Daya was an earthen pot with a tap at the bottom. It was rested on a steel stand, and the tumbler on the floor received drops from the loose tap, acknowledging each drop with a distinct noise. To the right of this was an old bureau that was becoming rusty and nearing retirement. Having looked around the room, Sanvi's mother got her eyes back to Daya and his table. On the table was a paperweight that was never put to use, and a few files that decorated the table, making it look less empty and more useful. Daya had removed his hat and put it in front of him, with the emblem facing Sanvi and her mother.

‘What is the matter with you, Sanvi? Why are you crying like this?’, asked Daya, looking visibly concerned.

‘My little ones have been kidnapped!’, replied Sanvi. Feigning ignorance, Daya made a shocked face and said, ‘What! You are married?’

‘Ayyo! No, sir. Little ones as in puppies.’, explained Sanvi's mother.

‘Twenty-two puppies are missing, sir!’, said Sanvi as she started to cry again.

‘You have come to the police station and it is our responsibility to address your concerns. Stop crying now, Sanvi!’, said Daya like a sincere officer. ‘Sir,

someone has done it deliberately. It has some serious purpose behind it.’, said Sanvi. ‘Definitely they will do it with a purpose, Sanvi. Who will do things without a purpose? Are they artists?’ ‘But what could be the purpose behind this, sir? If they had been foreign breeds it still would make some sense. But these are street dogs that one could find anywhere in India. Why would they steal them?’, asked a perplexed Sanvi.

‘They steal it because they have a market!’, said Daya spinning a story in his head as to make the theft look big. ‘What market?’, screamed Sanvi’s mother, not making sense of what Daya was saying, but also realizing that this was something huge. ‘Of late, the Koreans have given up eating chicken and mutton and shifted to dogs, it seems. Did you not watch that news coverage on CNT? They ran a half hour programme on the kinds of dogs they eat, the variety of dishes they make, and the countries from which they import these dogs. India is one of them.’ Sanvi, who was cut off from the real world, didn’t know that there was no such news channel, and believed Daya’s story. ‘So are your little ones also getting exported?’, asked Daya to make her panic even more. ‘What! Will the Koreans eat my babies up? How can they even imagine doing that? What has gone wrong with the world?’, lamented an infuriated Sanvi.

Murthy rolled his eyes. He couldn’t take the absurdity of all this. The other constables chuckled through closed mouths. Everyone in the station gave up their time and listened keenly to the unfolding drama. ‘I love Korea, sir. For a long time I have wanted to visit Seoul. I even watch Korean movies and serials, sir.’ At this juncture, as though to show the others in the station that she was a cool mother, Sanvi’s mom said ‘I know the Gangnam Style song also, sir.’ She started doing the Gangnam dance steps, singing along with her horrid voice. Everyone in the station started laughing. ‘Stop it, Ma.’, whispered Sanvi in her ears and she stopped with a disappointed look. To hide the embarrassment, her mother explained, ‘Only when we play Gangnam Style do the dogs eat food. Otherwise they don’t even come into the house. It’s such a pity; the dogs that eat listening to Korean songs are going to be eaten up by the same Koreans now.’

‘Last week I attended a Korean food festival here and...do you know, I have never missed the Korean film festival?’ said Sanvi, still unable to control herself. ‘We even spoke to the chefs, sir. They all looked fine. There were no dog dishes in the food festival. Where did they get this stupid habit from?’ Irritated with their banter, and wanting them to feel his worthy presence, Daya, said ‘By now they should have been shipped off to Korea, right Murthy?’ He knew very well that Murthy wouldn’t respond. By now, he was used to an indifferent and indignant Murthy. ‘Shipping, eh? Korea is very far away, no, sir?’, said Sanvi’s mother. ‘Arre! Where do you think Korea is?’ said Daya and without giving much time to respond he said ‘If we take a boat from Vizag and travel north, its North Korea. If we travel south, its South Korea.’ Gaining some hope, Sanvi’s mother asked, ‘So which way should I go after I take a boat? This way or that way?’ pointing to opposite directions. ‘Why will you go? Am I dead?’, said Daya, pretending to be a very sincere officer and a caring friend. ‘Aren’t your babies my babies too? Take your mom and go home, I will bring them all back.’, he said, gently pushing them out of the station with a reassuring look on his face.

Rolling up his sleeves, he said, ‘I will bring all the dogs back. You leave peacefully.’ He then turned to his constables, shouting, ‘Hey! Start the helicopter! They wouldn’t have gone too far. What do the Koreans think about us Indians? They think they can fool us?’

‘Helicopter, ah?’, wondered Murthy, as he asked himself if there would be no end to Daya’s drama and Sanvi’s ignorance. ‘You go, Sanvi. I will take care of it. War on Korea!’, shouted Daya like an admiral preparing his troops for war. The constables laughed among themselves at the whole farce. As they left the station, Sanvi’s mother told Sanvi, ‘He is such a nice SI, don’t you think? Look at the pain he is undergoing, just so that he can get our dogs back. Who will put in so much effort to bring back some random street dogs?’, Sanvi nodded as she looked back into the station again to take a look at Daya, whom she now admired even more. ‘Why is catching a girl so much harder than catching a criminal, Murthy?’, said Daya, sitting on a chair close-by. He ordered one of his constables to bring him a strong tea. He rubbed his temples to relieve himself off the headache that had taken over. ‘If it gives you such a headache, think how bad it is for us.’, mumbled Murthy to himself.

As Daya sat on the chair rubbing his head, the station received a call. Kiran brought the phone from the table to Daya. It was Waltair Vasu. 'Hello brother! Where are you?', asked Vasu. An irritated Daya said, 'I'm in Korea, what about you?'

'I'm in a depression, brother.', replied Vasu, winking at his brother who was sitting next to him. 'No, what happened?', enquired Daya with a false sense of concern, which he had to use once in a while if he was to enjoy Vasu's luxuries. 'Missing you brother. Big time!', said Vasu hoping to emotionally trap Daya. He continued, 'You don't seem to understand. I respect and love you greatly.' Daya, who clearly saw what Vasu was trying to do, replied, 'I have respect for friendship. I give my life itself for friendship. All my life I have been looking for a worthy friend like you. And finally I have found you now. Get ready and I will give my life, right after I come back from Korea. For now though, goodbye.'

'This is another headache!', he said, turning to David who brought him the tea. Vasu put the phone down, turned to his brother and said, 'Arre! Who is this guy? He is ten times worse than me! What do we do with him? With such smart cops everywhere, how will we survive?'

The next day, Sanvi was sitting in her house with her mother as her visually impaired grandma sat close by under a tree singing an old song. Sanvi hadn't eaten the whole day, and her mother was pleading with her to have some juice. Sanvi didn't reply; she only held to her mother's lap tightly as she cried. Her mother was patting her and running her hands through Sanvi's long mane. 'How do you expect me to eat when I don't know what has happened to my babies? Have they already killed them all? If not, have they fed them proper food on time? Will they survive the change in climate? Why has your Krishna not come to our rescue now, grandma?', she asked, looking at her grandmother, who kept singing.

The trees in Sanvi's house were shedding leaves as if mourning the departure of the dogs. They used to run around the trees, and often try to climb them when they spotted a squirrel or sparrow. Sanvi, drowned in grief, had forgotten to feed the lovebirds. They were making a lot of unpleasant chirps. Her mother reminded her of the food for the other animals. 'If you want to mourn the loss of these dogs, you don't eat. But why are you not feeding the others? Go feed them. Otherwise even they will be gone.' Sanvi got up from her mother's lap and fed the birds and animals when they heard the sound of a truck. 'Hey Sanvi, sounds like some vehicle has come to our door. Go check who it is.', ordered her Grandma.

Sanvi reluctantly went to check. She dreaded that it would be some relative disturbing her at one of the worst times of her life. The thought of explaining the integral role of pets in her life to her relatives, for whom they were merely beasts and a waste of time, energy and resources, was annoying Sanvi even more. To her surprise, it was a police van. Two constables appeared from the jeep that came along with the van, and Daya was walking behind them. Sanvi, on seeing Daya, ran to him and asked, 'What happened to my dogs? Were you able to find them? Why are you so silent? Please say something!'

Daya walked silently to the side, looked at the constables and nodded. They opened the doors of the van, and twenty dogs jumped out. A surprised Sanvi hugged Daya tightly and grinned, 'Thank you so much! You have no idea how indebted I am to you!' Sanvi's mother, equally excited, ran to her dogs. 'All of them have come back! Bunty, Chintu, Bujji...' She hugged the dogs that came to her. A few of them ran to Sanvi and the rest to her grandma who, with her walking stick, was trying to get to the gate. 'Krishna!', said her grandma in sweet surprise.

'Here, madam. Check if all of them have come. Sub-inspector Daya put in so much effort to bring them back. So many helicopters, so much fighting with the smugglers. They almost took them away. Count yourself lucky you found someone like officer Daya.', said one of the constables, just as Daya had

instructed them to. Sanvi hugged Daya tighter and bent down to take a small puppy in her hand to show to Daya. 'How can someone have the heart to kill these cute ones and eat them up? They are the beasts, yet they call these animals!'

'I have brought them back now, right? Are they not safe now? Calm down Sanvi. Everything is alright now.'

Sanvi's mother, now that she was done playing with the dogs, came to Daya and said, 'Thank you so much, sir! How did you find the dogs so easily?'

'What? Easily? There was a big war at sea! The ship almost reached Korea and we had to fight with them to bring these back. Two days of tiring war there at the Korean border!' said Daya, trying to exaggerate things as much as he could to seal his place in Sanvi's heart. 'Two days, eh? It has been only one day since the complaint was lodged, and you say two days?', said the grandma, who was smarter than Sanvi and her mother. She picked up on the gaps that the emotional Sanvi and her mother had missed. Daya panicked for a moment, but quickly regained his ground and said, 'Grandma! Yesterday for us is yesterday. Yesterday for the Koreans is the day before yesterday. How much is one and one? Two days, right? That's why it took two days.' Sanvi, who didn't want to remain silent and prove her ignorance, tried chipping in with the little that she thought she knew. 'Grandma! Don't you know how time zones vary across the world? When it's day here, it's night abroad.'

Sighing, Daya turned to one of the constables as he said, 'This is one dangerous Grandma you have. Go take care of her.' The constables went to the grandma and spoke to her as Daya was talking to Sanvi and her mother. 'Grandma, do you know that because of this the trade relations between India and Korea have been upset? They say they won't take water from us, and they won't send us their electronic gadgets.', said one of the constables. The other told her, 'They are so angry with us that they say they will build a wall in the middle of the sea.', said

another one wanting to join in the fun. 'What are you people talking about? I can't believe a word of it.', said the grandma. 'Times are changing grandma. Technology is developing. Everything is possible nowadays.' Daya, who was done talking, looked at the constables and signalled for them to leave. 'Call me whenever there is some trouble. I'm now your family friend.', he said to Sanvi. He turned to her grandma, touched her feet, and left the house with a feeling of accomplishment.

Arriving home, he found Charles and Sobhraj chilling in the swimming pool. Daya sat close by on a wooden chair and removed his boots. 'So what plans do you have today? Whose house are you getting into today? Or is it a shop?', asked Daya 'Sir, we did a great job by stealing the dogs. It was a tough job. We almost got ourselves killed. And we had to escape by biting them back. So we have decided to take a week off. We want to completely relax before venturing out again.', said Charles coolly, as though it was his right to take leave as it pleased him. Daya, infuriated, threw the boot at Charles and said 'What? Have you already forgotten the deal? You stay here only so long as you steal and bring me money every day. This isn't your mother-in-law's house to relax and take time off. Do you get it?'

'Yes, sir! We are sorry. We will go out tonight and bring you something just as it was agreed. Forgive us this once. We are really sorry.', said Sobhraj holding Charles by his shoulder, pacifying him. Daya, happy that the two thieves were mere slaves under him and not his partners in crime, went to bed peacefully.

Chapter 5

‘Now everything seems like it is going along nicely, right? But a crook is never happy. He needs to constantly mess around with someone, to have some fun.’, said Daya to the old man. ‘Why? You have a nice job, you have relieved yourself of the poverty and powerlessness that plagued your childhood, you got yourself a nice flat, and it seems like you’re also getting a girl very soon. What now?’, asked the old man, who by now was completely immersed in Daya’s story. ‘How can the hero get the heroine so easily? She is an ideal girl. Would she not have much competition? There was this guy who was close to her. I knew that because of him, my chances would be seriously reduced. One day I was doing my routine collection at the bazaar. A shopkeeper hadn’t been paying me properly, so I had gone to warn him.’

A winding staircase led to the shop on the first floor. It was a small restaurant, the sort where usually couples sit together, have drinks and talk for hours. Since it was by the shore and very peaceful, many couples went to the beach afterwards. No wonder, the owners made a lot of money. So it angered Daya when the shopkeeper wasn’t ready to give him a part of the profit regularly. He himself went to the shop and left his constables in the jeep. The shopkeeper was shaking out of his wits and apologized. All such people usually gave in, for they had families to feed. How can a family man be a rebel?

As he walked down the staircase, he saw Sanvi standing at a distance. She was standing on the other side of the road leaning on to the railings and biting her nails. She was wearing a black polka-dot cotton shirt underneath a yellow overcoat. The skirt she wore was gently dancing with the breeze as Sanvi stared into nothingness. Daya started walking towards her as he removed his RayBan shades.

Just as he took two steps, a man approached Sanvi. Daya stood there without

moving and watched what was happening. A tall man wearing a maroon kurta with a shoulder bag came close to her. He had a flute in his hand and tickled Sanvi with it as he came close to her. Daya became completely enraged by this and threw the shades on the ground. 'Murthy! My music system! Murthy! How dare he try to operate it! Did you see where he touched my music system?', he said as he stamped the ground in anger. Sanvi in the meantime was smiling and happily talking to him. 'Why is she smiling at him? Look, Murthy! He is giving her the flute. Who is he, Murthy? Why is my music system getting that stupid flute? Why is he getting the flute and playing it again? Who on earth is he, Murthy?'

Murthy stood still, staring, not knowing what to say. The guy took something out of his bag and started feeding Sanvi. 'Cake! Cake, Murthy! Who does he think he is to feed my girl cake? Go find out who he is, Murthy! Go!' said Daya. Murthy obliged. Daya stood there rolling up his sleeves, getting ready to beat the wits out of the flautist. He was breathing heavily and kicked a coconut tree close by, murmuring to himself. 'I go early in the morning to the beach, talk such nonsense, plan things out and retrieve the dogs to win her heart, and here comes a man with a flute. And he thinks he can take her away from me that easily? I will show him what Daya is, what the police force is.'

Murthy crossed the road and got closer to them, as the flautist playfully hit her shoulder. Both of them were laughing. Daya, unable to witness all this, left the area and sat in the jeep, still enraged at what he just saw. Daya, in this state, lost all self-control and took the illegal gun he had with him. The gun that the government provided that needed to be accounted for. Each bullet went into the records. He had got this gun from Vasu and, unlike the official revolver, kept this one in his socks. He took it out, loaded it up and stood aiming the gun at the man.

Murthy spoke to them, as if without any pretence. Since he already knew Sanvi, he spoke to her as an acquaintance, and communicated all the necessary details. 'That is mine! My music system!', said Daya, clenching his teeth.

Murthy came right on time to take the gun off Daya's hands and said 'Calm down, sir! Why are you getting so agitated? Will you shoot him off just like that?' said Murthy. 'If someone does this to your music system, then you will understand. Tell me what you found out. What business does he have with my Sanvi?', enquired Daya. 'Nothing, sir. He isn't her boyfriend. His name is Vennela Kishore,' said Murthy. 'Then why did you shake hands with him? What happened Murthy? Tell me!', shouted Daya.

'It seems, sir...they say they are going to get married next month, sir.' replied Murthy calmly without any change of expression, but deep down he was very happy that a nice girl like Sanvi would not end up with a beast like Daya. 'Marriage, eh? What? Love or arranged?', asked Daya and continued even before Murthy could reply, 'How does it matter? Why didn't she tell me, Murthy? Who did she ask before committing herself to this marriage?', he said as he honked the horn loudly. 'Look at him Murthy! He looks like a donkey. Why does she want to marry someone like him? Look at how gorgeous my music system is. And look at that idiot, Murthy!', screamed Daya. 'Sir, he is in the music business, and Sanvi, as you know, works in the pet shop,' said Murthy as though that explanation would cool Daya down. 'So will we sit here and watch them dance? What do you mean, Murthy!', shouted Daya.

'That is my system, Murthy! Do you know how it feels when someone else lays their hands on your system? What does she like in him?', Daya continued, 'Sir, the girl is a nice singer. The boy plays the flute very well, sir.', replied Murthy. 'So they'll run a concert together and I should sit and watch them perform?', said Daya enraged without showing any sign of calming down. 'I will fix his concert today. Call him and tell him there is a concert tonight, Murthy.', said Daya, already having sketched out another plan to dispose of the hands that touched his music system.

Kishore was a flautist who was bearing the brunt of the growth of technology and an inflow of western music. Every other person has a gadget in his hand,

always listening to music. They have no need to pay for concerts these days. With the unprecedented flow of western music, indigenous genres of music in developing countries were losing their significance, and people like Kishore were running out of business. So as soon as he received a call that a flautist was needed to perform that night at a private venue, Kishore agreed. Now that he was soon to be wed, he also had to start acting like a responsible man, something the artists are never accustomed to. He had to start earning money on a regular basis, saving up judiciously for later use.

He took a call and an address was given to him, asking him to be at the venue by 10 that night. He was told that they would pay him 2,500 Rupees for four hours. A happy Kishore took his old scooter, with the same maroon kurta, and carried his flutes in a jute bag with him. He drove to the place, humming different songs and enjoying the night breeze of Hyderabad, the only time when it felt less polluted and more refreshing. He got to the place without any directions for he knew the streets like the back of his hand. All his childhood, he had roamed on the streets of Hyderabad with his friends, and later as an artist performed at various places to different audiences. He locked his scooter and checked it three times, for it was the only property he had.

A well-lit independent house welcomed Kishore. The outside of the house had serial lamps creeping on the walls, giving the building a festive look. An unsuspecting and a happy Kishore walked into the house. As he entered the building, he was greeted by a young woman, around twenty-five years of age. She was wearing a saree and leaning on the door as Kishore walked in. Around fifteen women of the same age were seated in different places in the room. Each of them sat in different positions but their eyes were all fixed on Kishore. Kishore felt somewhat awkward to be surrounded by so many women of roughly the same age. He walked to the bar and expected someone to be kind enough to receive him and make him feel comfortable.

One woman got up, came close to Kishore and adjusted her saree (it had forgotten its duty and revealed her navel). 'Take a seat.', she said, pointing to the

bed close by and rubbed Kishore's shoulders gently. 'Sure. But please don't touch me. I'm quite shy. I'm not very comfortable with this.', said Kishore as he sat on the bed. He put down his jute bag to select the flute he would play first. In the meantime, another woman, wearing a purple t-shirt and black jeans, walked over from the sofa and sat with Kishore on the bed. She put her left arm over Kishore's shoulders. He was too busy looking for the right flute and hadn't even noticed her approaching. The minute she put her hands over him, he freaked out. 'Listen! I'm not used to being treated like this. If you continue doing this, I will walk out of the room. You can take your money back.' The woman, unphased, put her right leg over his thighs. Kishore, enraged at this, pushed her away and got up with his bag. Another woman, at this point, ran to him and said, 'Sorry! Sorry! Sit down. It won't happen again.', as she pulled him to the bed again and made him sit.

Kishore took out a flute. 'I will first start with a small flute. Then we will go to the base. Slowly we will increase the size.' The women around him giggled and said 'Sure! Sure as you say vidwan.' Kishore played the popular Ve vela gopenmala from the movie Sagara Sangamam. Kishore, surmising that the audience was not acquainted with classical music, chose this piece from a popular movie. They all knew the song and sang along with him. A few of them danced around. One stood on the bed and danced right behind his head. Then he took a larger flute and played a song from another popular movie. This one was more upbeat: even he started dancing a little as he played. By now he was surrounded by dancing.

Not even ten minutes into the concert, the police kicked open the door, as is their habit. An inspector, along with three constables, walked straight in. One constable had a video recorder in his hand, capturing the whole episode. They came and stood in front of Kishore, who was having a ball, completely immersed in music and dancing. Kishore paused and said, 'Welcome, sir. Take a seat.'

'Hey! What do I look like to you? What are you doing here?', asked the

inspector. 'A concert, sir,' said Kishore. 'What? A concert in a brothel house?', asked the inspector. Kishore, dumbfounded, quickly looked around the house and said, 'Sir, there is no red light here! The lights are white and we are just playing the flute. The women giggled at his innocence. None of them were shocked, for they were all told about this trap and paid adequately. 'Brothel, eh? Are these prostitutes? I didn't know, sir!', said Kishore turning around and quickly glancing at their faces. 'Oh? Then what did you think they were?', asked the inspector in a sarcastic tone. 'I thought they were music-lovers, sir! They called me and offered a good price. That's why I agreed. The address was sent to me and then I came looking for them, sir. I didn't know it was a brothel. Is this the place where all the drunkards come, sir?'

'Who do you think we are? Do we look like fools to you? All grown up and you don't recognize a brothel house? Who are you fooling?', said the inspector as he walked close to him and slapped Kishore. 'Sir, please believe me. I'm truly innocent. I come from a good family. I have never been to these places. Please let me go, sir.', begged Kishore.

'So all this was your plan?', the old man asked Daya. 'Yes, yes, completely mine. I still have their phone. If you want it, let me know.', said Daya, laughing. 'I'm too old now. Why else do you think I'm sitting here in the night and talking to you? Because I'm too old for anything else.', Daya laughed again and said, 'Okay. Listen. The next day I went to Sanvi's house and met her and her stupid mother. As we sat in the hall, I turned the TV on hopping between channels as I spoke to Sanvi. After a good five minutes, I changed to the news channel and pretended like I was watching the daily news.'

Sanvi was sitting next to Daya. Her mother sat close by in another chair, looking at the old TV, bought almost a decade ago. She was combing the hair of a fluffy lapdog and Sanvi's grandmother was sitting on another chair with beads in her hand, chanting the Hanuman Chalisa.

‘A flautist by the name of Vennela Kishore was caught red-handed in a brothel raid last night.’, read the reporter. As though he had no idea about what was happening, Daya sighed, murmured a little loudly, ‘These guys!’, and took the remote to change the channel. He took it slowly enough not to actually change it, and as expected, Sanvi said ‘Wait, wait!’ and watched the report for more details. ‘The Minister for Culture cancelled the flautist’s membership and immediately cancelled all his shows across the state.’ Sanvi, totally aghast, started crying. She felt humiliated and cheated by Kishore who she was to marry soon. ‘What happened, Sanvi?’, asked a happy Daya, for he saw that his plan was slowly working. Sanvi’s mother, also starting to cry, said, ‘We were about to have Sanvi married to this rascal.’ Looking at the TV she continued ‘If I had trusted you and given my daughter to you in marriage, what would have happened to her life? My God!’, Daya tried his hardest to forge a concerned face while hiding his joy.

As instructed, the constables brought Kishore to Sanvi’s house twenty minutes after Daya’s arrival. Daya went to Sanvi’s mother and said, ‘Forget whatever happened. Now I know he is your would-be son-in-law, I will take care of it. I will make sure there is no case for him, and the whole issue can be hushed down. Don’t you worry. Go make the necessary arrangements for the marriage.’

‘What marriage? I thought that he would perform a duet with my daughter, and that is why I agreed for the marriage. But look at what this scoundrel has done. He wants to dance for item numbers.’, said Sanvi’s mother angrily. ‘You are misunderstanding me, Aunty. They were the ones who called me and asked me to come. They said they would pay me for my performance.’, explained Kishore in vain. ‘Oh? They give you payment also in return?’ said Sanvi’s mother who was getting more irate with every passing second. ‘What is this payment at midnight?’, she continued, and Kishore was cut off when he said, ‘No, Aunty—’

‘Who are you calling “aunty”?’ She went to slap him but was held back by Sanvi.

Sanvi's grandmother had been silent all this time. Eventually she said, 'Will you not listen to his side of the story as well? Don't judge him so quickly.'

'Yeah! Right! I listened to you and agreed to this marriage. You kept saying he is an amazing groom and convinced all of us. Look at what he is doing now.', said Sanvi's mother.

'Aunty! I truly am a good person!', said Kishore trying his best to absolve himself of the accusation.

'If you call me "aunty" another time, I'll get the dogs to bite your limbs off!'

'Aunty! Stop this. Calm down. You are not ready to ruin your daughter's life by entrusting her to him. Isn't that so?', asked Daya, who was desperately waiting for his cue. 'Yes, Daya', said Sanvi's mother with a markedly polite and affectionate tone, in stark contrast to the one she had been using with Kishore.

'Hey!', Daya said, looking at Kishore. 'Leave this place immediately. If I see you around this girl any other time in the future, I will kill you. He took his gun out and threatened him enough to mean that he was being serious and also enough to scare him off.

'Sanvi, I will call you later. I will explain things to you on the phone.', said Kishore as he was leaving the place.

'Try coming into her life in anyway and see what happens then.', said Daya. He

was now relieved that Kishore had been successfully sent away, and that Sanvi was all for himself now.

Now that he had left her house and her heart, Daya wanted to ensure that Kishore would never come into her life again. He started piling up stories after stories to make sure Sanvi couldn't like or trust him. He started with a bang. 'Anyway, what's this desire to be with someone who keeps throwing stones at dogs? Will you not choose someone more like you?', he said. Completely shocked, Sanvi said, 'What? He throws stones at animals? He said he loved them!'

'That's what he said to get close to you. In fact, he even wakes sleeping dogs up to beat them again.'

'My blood boils to see guys like him harass those innocent creatures.' Sanvi turned all that hatred of Kishore into fondness for Daya the minute he spoke of dogs with so much concern. Love for dogs was the first characteristic any man must possess to get close to Sanvi. Looking at him, she asked, 'Do you really love dogs so much?' Daya clearly understood the transition and was excited at having come this close to winning her love. He said 'Like them? I was born amidst dogs; I grew up with dogs. I worked with a canine chemist. What do you think dogs are?', he asked Sanvi as though she didn't know, and needed someone like Daya to teach her. Yet Sanvi listened to him with so much attention that Daya confidently walked closer to Sanvi and continued, 'Dogs are the only creatures that love us unconditionally. I don't know if god exists, but if he did he would have to compete with dogs to prove his mettle as a pure soul. They love human beings more than they love fellow dogs! Leave all that. Have you realized we look for dogs in human beings also?' Sanvi, who was amazed at the things he was saying about dogs listened to him keenly and with admiration. 'You know? We want a husband like a dog, who obeys his wife irrespective of what she does; a dog-like wife who will take the abuses of the husband and still be faithful; a driver who works like a dog; dog-like maids, and—' pointing at Sanvi's grandmother, he continued, 'Whether we are at home or not, a dog like

this old woman who will take care of the house. If that's insufficient, we find another dog, keeping it as a pet.', he said.

He took a deep breath as if he had finished a lengthy monologue on stage, took a few steps away from Sanvi, turned, and let out that smile, which he had been hiding all this time realizing that Sanvi was falling for him. Returning to a serious expression, he resumed his position close to Sanvi. With a dramatic voice, he said, 'I tell people that human beings don't need humanity, but the behaviour of a dog. The world will be a better place if we all emulate them. Look! If I were to marry, I would become a dog to my wife and change her into a dog for me.' Sanvi smiled. Then, forgetting that so many others were around, she blushed. Daya was reassured of her love for him with this smile. He didn't want to waste time and take away the fondness he had managed to instil in her. He made a cinematic exit. Immediately after he was done reciting the dialogue, he walked towards his car as Sanvi and her mother stood amazed. As Murthy started the car. Daya put on his shades, took the passenger seat and waved to Sanvi and her mother. The car vanished from their view.

Chapter 6

It was another normal day at the police station. Daya woke up with the same hangover, dressed up in his khaki with the same pride he had in becoming a police officer, and losing the weakness that he had as a kid: powerlessness. Murthy picked him up from his flat. He had to drive the way Daya enjoyed it: playing loud music, causing disturbance to the people on the road, and paying no mind to the traffic signals. As he entered the station, Daya had Vasu on his mind. He was planning that day to get some of the money owed by Vasu. It had been over a week since he received anything.

There was a forty-something lady waiting for Daya on a wooden stool nearby. She had come to the station thrice already, but the constables hadn't given her a listening. She had asked to talk to the SI but, Daya was never around to listen to the issues of the people for whom he was supposed to work. He was either away at Vasu's place collecting money, drinking, or dancing to item numbers or with Sanvi, taking her to new places on his jeep and buying her things in the hope that someday she would fall for him. Of late, he had started celebrating birthdays of the various dogs in her house. He also went with her to collect funds for the blue cross, and did a whole range of other things. So he was never really there for the job he was paid to do.

The forty-year-old wore a red churidaar and her hair was brown with the mehndi she used instead of hair dye. She tried to wipe her tears away with the end of her dupatta and looked around embarrassed to check if anybody had seen her crying. The golden bangles on her hand made a ringing sound as she wiped her face. As Daya walked into the station, she ran to him. A few constables ran to stop her from talking to Daya, but he signalled them to leave her. 'Sir, my daughter has been missing for three days. I haven't heard a word from her. She never goes anywhere without telling me.' Even as she was talking, Daya spoke to a constable close by: 'Kiran! When are you producing him in the court?' He turned to the woman and said, 'Why did you stop? Continue!'

‘Even if she is late by ten minutes, she calls me. But now her phone is switched off. I’m really scared sir. Please help me.’ A couple accused of squatting, who were waiting in one corner of the station, looked at this scene and laughed. ‘She must be a fool to think that he would help her get her daughter back.’, said one to the other. Daya, with a lot of irritation, asked, ‘What’s her age?’

‘She is about to graduate sir.’, she replied quickly as though her swift answers will bring her daughter back immediately.

‘Do you have a photo of her?’

‘Yes, sir.’, she said as she quickly dug into her bag to take the photo out.

‘Show it to me!’ Even as she was giving it to him, he turned to another constable and said, ‘Did he come? Tell him now that if he sits with me, the entire matter can be settled within minutes. He is rich isn’t he? What’s wrong with these rich people? Don’t they know they can solve any case if they are ready to spend money? Talk to him and get it done quickly.’

He got the photo from her and asked her if she had already lodged a formal complaint. ‘No, sir. Your constables are not very supportive.’, she said as though Daya was an earnest man. ‘They are government employees, not your servants. Anyway, write a written complaint and leave it here. I’ll take care of it.’, said Daya. ‘Don’t forget to leave other details like her cell phone number, friends list, etc. I will order an enquiry.’ He turned to the constable and said, ‘Hey! Take the details down.’ He put the photo on the table as the lady sat on the other side of the table and started dictating the details to the constable. Daya walked to another constable close by and asked him, ‘Why is he not giving what he has

to?’

‘He says he will face the case in the court, sir.’

‘Oh, is he one of those anti-bribery crusaders? Fine, fine, let’s see what he can do in the court. You go get me a strong tea.’, ordered Daya as he sat down on the chair and put his boots on the table. Very quickly he fell into a deep slumber only to be woken up by a call from Vasu twenty minutes later.

‘What happened to you? Why are you calling me when I’m having a nice dream?’

‘Listen, there is a nice mango grove right by the main road next to your station. It is owned by a guy called Thota Rao. I have tried everything I can think of to get the land. I offered him a decent rate, threatened him, but nothing seems to be working. He went to the collector and complained about me. I want the land at the earliest date possible. I don’t know what you will do, but I want it!’, said Vasu as though the land was rightfully his.

Even without responding to Vasu, Daya disconnected the call and shouted, ‘Murthy! Take the jeep, we have got our work for the day.’ Murthy, like always, couldn’t do much, so he silently went to the jeep and started it.

After a two-minute ride, the jeep went straight into the garden of Venkat Rao. It was a one acre land. It had mango trees standing in straight lines, making a natural arch. It was the right season too, so there were plenty of mangoes hanging from the branches. Daya walked to an old man who was calmly watering the plants. As he walked, by mistake, he kicked a basket filled with

mangoes, but kept walking, not minding what he had done. Apart from the mango trees, behind the old man were a series of flower plants that gave beautiful blossoms, bringing colour to the garden. The old man was wearing a white dhoti, and on top of that, a white sleeveless undershirt. On top of that he had a red towel to mop his sweat. He had been treating the plants and trees since the early morning, so the towel was soaked through. He put the hose pipe aside and greeted, 'Hello, sir. What is it that brings you to my garden?'

Daya, who had by now examined the whole garden, was already convinced that such a nice place was wasted in the hands of someone like Venkat Rao, who could not fully utilize the land's potential. He walked up to Venkat Rao and said, 'Sir, I'm Daya, sub-inspector of Vizag Police. But I have come to talk to you as a fellow human being. It is concern that brings me here, not power. Can we talk for a while?' Putting the hosepipe down and turning off the tap, Rao said, 'Of course, sir. Come.' He took Daya to a stone bench, which he had built a couple of years ago amidst the flowers, to rest on and sip coffee in the mornings and evenings. 'Will you have something to drink?', asked Rao. Daya refused it as coolly as Rao had asked.

'Looks like a nice garden. When did you buy it?', asked Daya getting straight to the topic.

The unsuspecting Rao said, 'Twenty-five years ago.'

'Haha. I was still a child then! How quickly time passes. I grew old as these trees grew old then, just that I didn't have a gardener. Anyway, how much did you get this for then?' Rao ignored the part about Daya not having a parent lest it upset him, and answered, 'Two lakhs at that time.'

'And what is the market price now?', asked Daya. 'Last time I checked it was

five crores,’ said Rao without any surprise, as he expected such an increase. That was the time when a few people realized that in the future, land will have more value than gold itself, and bought lands cheaply, confident that it would be worth the investment. Rao was one of these, and so he was merely happy with the choice he made back then, and not terribly surprised by the returns.

‘Whoa!’ exclaimed Daya as he understood the value of the land. Now he could comprehend why Vasu was after this land so desperately. ‘So, it has grown up really well! So unlike me! Wonderful, wonderful.’ Rao smiled. ‘Then why are you not giving the land when Waltair Vasu is asking for it?’, asked Daya. ‘He threatened me many times, asking the land for a meagre fifty lakhs. I have put my entire life into this, and now he is threatening me for it, for such a low price.’, said Rao as this gnawing anxiety came back to plague him. He gulped and said, ‘Anyway, I don’t have any intentions of selling it now.’

‘You are growing old, why would you want to retain this property?’

‘I have kept it for my granddaughter, sir.’

‘Are these even reasons, sir? Your son will take care of your granddaughter. He will give her property that’s several times greater in worth than this one. Why do you worry?’

‘No, sir. She doesn’t have a father. I lost my son and daughter-in-law in an accident a few years ago. I’m the only one who is here to take care of my granddaughter. That is why I have cut down on all expenditure. I am saving everything up for my granddaughter’s studies and marriage.’

Daya by now realized that the old man cannot be treated with kindness, so he changed tactics to what he was best at doing. 'Why does Waltair Vasu then say that the papers are with him, and that the plot legally belongs to him?' The old man now panicked, because this would mean that years of his sacrifice and diligence will go into nothing. This also now meant that he wouldn't even get the fifty lakhs that Vasu offered him. Quivering, he said, 'Sir, but the original papers are with me.' Daya saw that this approach was yielding quicker and more favourable results. He continued in the same vain. 'How many of you have the original papers, sir? I should first talk to those officers. How will we police solve cases if they are readily giving away the same land papers to so many people?' The old man was sweating profusely and tried to wipe the sweat off his face with that red towel. Daya continued, 'If he takes the papers to the court and files a case, you also go to court. And you know how the courts work. By the time your granddaughter reaches a verdict with Vasu, you and I will be long dead. She will fight the case with Vasu's son and may or may not get it. Are you ready to spend big sums of money to fight this case? Vasu is rich, so he will manage. But can the middle class like us manage?'

'Sir, all this is very scary. I don't understand how he too can have the same papers.'

'Answer this simple question. Do you think you can go against Vasu? Do you think this issue will be solved if you refuse to be practical? Will your granddaughter ever be able to enjoy this property if you make enemies out of Vasu?'

The word "practical" was enough to get the old man to think—that one word which gives every man an excuse to give up what he stubbornly holds on to with conviction.

Daya came to the edge of his seat, looked at Venkat Rao, and said, 'Listen to me. He says he will give you fifty lakhs, right? I will explain your condition to him. I

will make sure you get sixty lakhs. Just sign the papers. Everything will be alright.'

'But sir, this is property worth five crores. This is the result of decades of hard work. I have no other property but this, and within minutes you tell me I won't have it, and instead have just sixty lakhs. Would you be able to handle it if you were in my condition?', urged Venkat Rao to Daya, hoping he would understand his plight and the police would salvage what he thought was already lost.

In times like these, people become so confident and hopeful in things that they have instinctually disbelieved in. Rao, who was always sceptical about the reliability of the state machinery, all of a sudden hoped that the State, courts, and the police would protect weak men like him from the oppressive, wealthy, and powerful people like Waltair Vasu. Daya had to break his hopes and prove another time what the state, courts and police are for. 'Sir, are these five crores more important to you than you granddaughter's life?' said Daya, putting his leg on the chair he was sitting on and placing his elbow on his knee. Looking at Venkat Rao he continued, 'You know what a fool he is. What will you do if someday they kidnap your granddaughter? Then it will be too late, and you know by then you will not even get the fifty lakhs that he is offering, or the better rate I'm promising you.'

The old man's eyes moved swiftly, not being able to concentrate on any one object. Daya, detecting these signs of fear, said, 'What will you do if they kill her in rage? She is a girl. Who knows what else they will do to her before killing her? Why do you want to take all these risks? I'm sure you brought her up as a nice girl. She will study well and with these sixty lakhs you will get her graduated too. Later on, she will stand on her own legs. Isn't that much better than getting her killed? What will you do with this property that you so stubbornly hold on to, if one day she herself is gone? Think wisely, sir.' Daya stretched his arms, almost certain that the mission had been accomplished. 'Understand what I'm saying, sir. Sign it!', he continued. Now that he was sure the old man was close to giving in he kept repeating, 'Sign it!' in different tones,

like an actor auditioning for a role.

At this point, Venkat Rao received a phone call. He quickly attended the call and someone on the other end of the call said, 'Sir, your granddaughter has been kidnapped.' He panicked. 'Wait, wait, I'm signing the papers! Don't do anything to my granddaughter!', he pleaded, not questioning why they might have kidnapped her. Daya had succeeded in making Rao believe in all that he was saying. The granddaughter was not actually kidnapped. Daya had brought Charles along with him on the jeep. He had instructed him earlier that, should he refuse Daya's requests, he must call Venkat Rao and tell him his granddaughter had been kidnapped. As Daya kept saying 'Sign it!', Charles realized that Daya was making sure to put Rao under immense pressure, and not to let him think. Now Charles called the old man and said, 'Sir, your granddaughter has been kidnapped.' Everything fell into place. They achieved what they had wanted.

'I told you! Didn't I? Now come complain to us that your granddaughter has been kidnapped and we will take a few months to find her, dead or alive, god only knows. Then go around telling everyone that the system is not working properly. Nobody will know that I came in person to explain the imminent danger. Why do you do this sir? Why so much of attachment for property when your granddaughter's life is in jeopardy?', said Daya. He had gotten into a threatening mood, and once Daya reaches this point, nobody can stop him. It always made him feel powerful. Given that he had a powerless childhood, constantly being threatened by the police, teachers and the bosses he worked under, he had a longing to get to the threat rather than the threatened. Whenever the world gave him that chance he pounced on it.

'They will kill her, sir! Once they kill her, neither you nor I can do anything about it. Why are you so stubborn?', he said. Venkat Rao, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, felt completely helpless. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He was taught that he should never cry, for this was unmanly. Rao quickly reached to his towel and wiped the tears off.

Daya now gave up this tone and adopted the earlier friendly one. He said, 'Why do we need a property that kills our beloved girl, sir? Listen to me, and sign the papers. Murthy! Bring the papers here.' Murthy, who had no other option but to listen, cursed himself for being a party to this. He tried consoling himself by saying that all this was a part of the duty, and that he should be happy for not saluting him like the others in the station. 'That would mean acknowledging his acts, and I don't stoop down quite so low.', he mumbled to himself, as he took the papers to the table.

Venkat Rao wasn't able to make sense of what was happening around him. He could see that Daya was talking, but nothing entered his mind. He signed the papers that were brought to him and cried profusely as he did so. Now that Daya's work was over, he got up, took the signed papers, and left without saying a word to Venkat Rao. The tone of concern that he was trying to muster all this time also vanished without trace. Venkat Rao sat motionless as tears rolled down his eyes.

Within ten minutes of Daya leaving, his granddaughter came home. He asked what happened to her. She said, 'Nothing, Grandpa. I'm coming home straight from school. Why, what happened?'

'Nothing.', said Rao, as he realized what had just happened, and why the policeman had come to meet him in person.

That night, after his usual routine of being a pain in so many lives, Daya wanted to take some time off for himself, and urged Murthy to go with him to the Vizag beach. Murthy was reluctant at first, for unlike Daya, he had a family and had his own responsibilities. He said, 'You are always around when I'm doing evil. Now, I want to spend some good time by the beach, doing nothing but feeling the breeze. You don't want to be there? What is this about, Murthy?' Murthy finally gave in. At the beach they didn't speak anything for the first twenty minutes. Then, Murthy thought that was the perfect time to confront Daya and

said ‘Sir, this is cheating. This is unjust.’ Daya, who didn’t understand what he was referring to, turned around and looked at Murthy expecting him to explain the statement. ‘How did you get the heart to cheat that old man sir? You saw his condition and still you did a horribly inhuman thing!’, said Murthy. Daya had no answer and kept staring at Murthy, who continued, ‘If this is not called a cold-blooded murder, then what else is, sir?’ Daya said nothing, and turned his head back to the sea, fixing his gaze on the waves, that were as indifferent to Daya as Daya was to Murthy.

‘Don’t you feel anything, sir? Do you not have a conscience?’, asked Murthy, more enraged now at not getting an answer. Daya broke his silence finally, when he realized that Murthy wasn’t going to let him get away without getting answers. ‘I have saved two lives, Murthy! They would have killed both the old man and the granddaughter if not for me. You saw how stubborn the old man was? He would have fought for the property with his life. In addition, I got them sixty lakhs—ten more than Vasu’s offer. There is this context too, Murthy! Why do you never look at this angle? Look at the world from my point of view. Murthy, things make more sense, and life is more comfortable from here.’

‘Oh? Now you even have justifications for the stupid things you do?’, Daya folded his left leg, put his left hand over the knee and glared at Murthy, who continued, ‘This is not right, sir. You are committing mistakes. You are abusing the power that has been given to you. Do you even realize you are paid by the taxes of the people and you are always answerable to them?’

‘As if they ask us, Murthy. They are too obsessed with their own small lives and besides, they think politics is none of their business. So, how does it matter? Even they themselves don’t mind me using their money and living a luxurious life. What is your problem, Murthy?’

‘Being a police officer means being on the side of truth, sir. Despite holding such an important post, you are supporting a loafer. You are with Waltair Vasu all the

time. This is not at all justified, sir. I have seen him from childhood. He is a big criminal, believe me!’, said Murthy, as though Daya didn’t know what kind of a man Vasu was, or how he was complicit to his crimes.

Daya was enraged at Murthy. He said, ‘Yeah! So you know you are right. You say you have been seeing him since childhood. You have been a resident of the same city as he even before I came. You know he is a big criminal too. Both of you have been around for more than twenty years in the same place. Then why don’t you kill him? The city will be better off, wont it?’ Daya took a gun from his pants and gave it to Murthy, saying, ‘Here, take this. Go shoot him. What’s the worst that could happen? They will convict you of murder and will hang you. Wont you do this for your people, since you love them all so much? You say you are answerable to them. Why don’t you sacrifice your life so that Venkat Rao, his granddaughter, and hundreds like them can live happily?’

Murthy didn’t see this coming. He kept staring at Daya. Daya knew he had the upper hand and continued with the same argument, ‘How does it matter if you die? Justice will survive. If you can do something then do it, otherwise shut up and just watch things happen around you. Don’t just keep talking without doing anything, irritating everybody around you. There are so many people like you in this city. Do you know that you guys are more dangerous than Vasu and I? More than the criminals, it’s the people like you, who are passive and do nothing other than make a mess in tea stalls and on social media and make the city worse.’

‘People like you are of no use to the country or the family.’, Daya asserted. ‘Justice, truth, honesty, patriotism! Stop all this vanity!’ Pointing to the bag he had brought from Vasu’s house, he said, ‘Learn how to count the five hundred thousand rupee notes in that bag.’ Murthy spat on the ground and said, ‘It is illegal money, I will not touch it.’ Daya went to Murthy, took a hundred rupee note out of Murthy’s pocket and took one out of his own, and crumpled both of them. He put them into his palm and shuffled them up. He opened his palms and said, ‘Now my money was illegal and yours was legal. Can you take your note back and not mine? Look Murthy, both our notes seem the same!’ Murthy looked

away from Daya, sick of his stupid explanations, but at the same time hating how convincing he found them.

‘You see whose photo have they printed on the notes? The personification of honesty. Yet all the crimes in the country happen before his eyes. He is the only witness to everything happening in the country.’ He put the note back into Murthy’s pocket and said, ‘Keep this. Keep your honest money with you but also take that bag home.’ Murthy promptly replied back ‘No! I will not touch that money.’

Daya, who by now recognized that he would not be able to convince Murthy, said, ‘Fine! You are my bank. Take this bag home and keep it with you. I’m depositing it with you and, you will return it whenever I ask!’, Murthy silently took the bag as he followed Daya to the jeep. ‘Talking as though I’m committing rapes and murders. Why do nuisances like these even join the department?’, Daya said under his breath. Murthy heard this and smirked as he drove the jeep to Daya’s flat, not saying a word.

Chapter 7

Murthy spent the whole night thinking about what Daya told him at the beach. 'People like you are of no use to the family or the nation.' This line kept coming back, to haunt him and never let him sleep. All the instances where he wanted to do something to curb the rowdies in his city had failed miserably because of lack of power. These failings passed through his mind like a video clip. When he joined as a constable, a man was beaten up black and blue on the road and Murthy arrested the guys. In less than half an hour, the inspector took a call. He learned that these were the sons of a local MLA and hence were let off. From this moment to the moment he saw Venkat Rao cry, Murthy had always been stifled from standing up for justice.

If in the public space it was like this, in the private space it was much worse. All the other constables who licked the boots of senior officers, or the stinking feet of politicians, were given multiple promotions and made money illegally. They all owned their own apartments by now and were well settled with their families. Murthy still lived in a rented house and was still only a constable. He wasn't able to get his mother treated in a proper hospital, couldn't buy jewellery for his wife and couldn't get her daughter the doctor's seat that she so desperately wanted. Now the veracity of Daya's statement hit him hard, and it hurt it to know that his honesty and integrity had been of no help to anybody.

With a poor sleep, he woke up earlier than usual the next morning and showered in cold water. He did the Surya Namaskara, as his daughter walked close by and said, 'Daddy, today is the last date to pay the fees. If we don't pay the fees they won't let me appear for the exam. They will expel me from college.' With folded hands, Murthy opened his eyes and looked at his daughter. Behind her on the table he saw the bag of money that Daya had asked him to take with him. 'Use this money if it's necessary. I won't think ill of you. You are a family man and will definitely need money.', Daya had said the previous night. 'People like you are of no use to the family or the country.' The line that hurt him all through the night came back to him. It was proven right again. 'How much do we have to

pay?’

‘Forty thousand, daddy.’

‘Your father doesn’t have that much money. Why should we wait till they remove you from college? You yourself quit college.’, he said, and closed his eyes again to continue his prayers.

His wife who was cooking in the kitchen heard the conversation and came to the veranda. ‘All police families are living a great life. When I got married I didn’t get an ounce of it and now even my daughter doesn’t have a good life. Forget us, what about your mother? Were you able to get a good treatment?’ She held her daughter by her hand and dragged her away, saying, ‘Only our lives are pathetic. What do we do, dear? Our bad luck. You have a father who can’t even educate you.’ As Murthy stood there helplessly, Daya’s continued to hit him. People like you are of no use to the family or the nation. Murthy sat down, not knowing how to manage such turbulence.

Daya, on the other hand was going about his business like nothing had happened the previous night. To top it off, it was Sanvi’s birthday. Daya got up earlier than usual, and got dressed in crisply ironed khaki pants and a blue checkered shirt. He wore his favourite leather boots and went to pick Sanvi up. They had planned to spend her birthday together. Daya, who already didn’t do much of the official work he ought to do as a police officer, now found another valid reason to stay away from the station for a full day. Sanvi was already standing in front of the pani-puri shop where they had decided to meet. They had by now gone to so many different places in the city together and explored so much that they knew exactly where to go on certain occasions. When he said, ‘Okay, then I will meet you by the pani-puri shop,’ she didn’t ask him which one. She knew he meant the one roughly a kilometre from his station. Sanvi had already thought of how close they were becoming, and she made no efforts to stop Daya getting closer. Not that she didn’t know how to keep men away, but she found a comfort zone

with Daya, and let him become her close friend.

As he went near Sanvi, he quickly picked up the shades lying in front of the steering wheel and wore them. He stopped the jeep in front of the shop and stepped down, feeling erect, masculine. As she saw him, she greeted, 'Hi!' Daya walked close to her and pulled her close to him. He hugged her tightly and exclaimed, 'Happy birthday!' Sanvi, impressed by his expressiveness, thanked him.

'Tell me what you want. Ask for anything!'

'You should have already brought something, that's all.'

'But what do I give you? What if I buy something pricey and then realize it's not fashionable, useful, or that you already have it? In case I buy something and then you don't like it, what do I do with that gift? Where do I put it?', said Daya and laughed. 'All these saris and other such things, I can't even imagine buying.'

'But why? Is it too awkward for you to enter these sari shops?'

'No, no. I don't know how to buy them. Tell me if you want something else, TVs, mobiles, electronic gadgets. Tell me anything from these smuggled items and they will be yours in five minutes.', Daya said proudly, like he was giving them to her from his own pocket.

'If I need something I will ask you. But I have one request for you. Please don't

take me on a ride in this police jeep. At least not today.’ Daya laughed.

‘Is it not common to bring a bike along when you are taking your girlfriend for a movie?’

‘Correct. No big deal, we will stop some random guys bike and take it. I’m from the police, you see.’ said Daya. He got down from the pavement and went to the road. ‘See? God also sends us the bike on right time!’ He stopped a guy riding an FZ. ‘Police!’

‘Sir, I have all my papers, sir.’

‘Who wants your stupid papers? I want the bike!’, Daya said as though it was his own bike he was asking for. The biker scared of what the police would do, got off the bike and asked if it was a chase. ‘Can’t I take it without telling you why?’, said Daya. The guy got down from the bike quietly and Daya hopped on. Sanvi, without being told, sat on the back, smiling. ‘Hey! In the evening come to the station and collect it. I’m the sub-inspector, so don’t worry about your bike. It will be safe.’, said Daya. ‘Safety and police? Do they even go together?’, the biker wondered out loud. ‘What?’, snapped Daya. ‘Nothing sir, I was wondering how I will go around the city today without a bike.’, said the biker. Daya took out keys out from his pant pocket and gave them to the biker. ‘These are my jeep keys. Use that today. Unlike on your bike, you can go anywhere you want to, ignore traffic signals, not get stopped by the traffic police who want money. Nothing. So have fun!’, said Daya. The biker was walking towards the jeep as Daya said, ‘Don’t forget to fill the tank before you bring the jeep back to the station in the evening.’ The biker exclaimed, ‘Full tank, eh?’ as Daya sped away with Sanvi.

Sanvi and Daya didn’t like the noise and crowd of the city. So whenever they

went out together it wasn't for the movies or the malls, but beaches and even temples if they were less crowded and enjoyed their privacy. Daya drove his bike straight to a less crowded beach. Since it was around ten in the morning it was completely empty. Sanvi sat on one of the rocks as Daya threw pebbles into the waves. The sun had been covered partially by the clouds, making it even more pleasant for the two of them to sit there in the morning. The breeze was blowing gently across the shore and the waves made a familiar and comforting noise against the sand.

'You have dogs in your department, right? All well-trained and intelligent?', asked Sanvi to Daya. 'Yes,' said Daya as he wondered why she would be asking these random questions on their date. 'We have asked many times but never got any. My dogs are ready to breed now. We tried through so many contacts but no one could help. Will you please arrange for it?', pleaded Sanvi. Daya laughed and said, 'It has been over two and half decades and I haven't been bred yet. Nobody cares about us. But here you are asking me to arrange for the dogs to be bred.' This made Sanvi laugh. 'If the dogs want to be bred, you ask so decently. But if we ask, we are looked at as dogs. Such a weird role reversal, I tell you!', said Daya.

Seeing a fisherman come to the shore with a net, he started walking towards him as he said, 'Dont worry, I will set something up for your dogs. What else do we do? Such a strange world!' Sanvi sat there admiring the sweet frustration Daya was in. As he went to the fisherman he noticed he had brought fish that was caught just then.

'Which fish do you want?' he screamed to Sanvi from there.

'For what?'

‘For frying and eating.’

‘I hate killing fish.’, said Sanvi. What else should Daya have expected of a middle-class woman who runs a pet clinic? Why wouldn’t she also be a vegetarian?

‘Do you eat chicken?’

‘No.’, said Sanvi sternly.

‘Mutton?’

‘No.’

‘Arre! What else do you eat then?’, asked Daya as though there was nothing else to eat in the world besides meat.

Sanvi laughed and said, ‘Lentils, ghee, brinjal curry, mango pickle, and drumstick sambhar.’

‘Then you don’t want papad?’, teased Daya making fun of her strict vegetarian regime, which was to him, a very dull and boring diet.

‘Without that, I won’t eat any of this.’, she said, not understanding that Daya was teasing her. ‘Okay, shall I eat at least?’, asked Daya, as though he wouldn’t eat non-vegetarian food in his life after this in case she said no. ‘No,’ she said. ‘They are dead anyway now. If we throw them back into the sea, the sea will become dirty and stink.’ Sanvi rolled her eyes at the weak explanation Daya was giving. ‘You wait!’, he told her, turning to the fisherman. ‘Hey! Tell me, what varieties of fish do you have?’ The fisherman replied ‘Whichever variety you ask for, sir.’

‘What is this reply? Put the nets down!’, he said and went close to the nets to take a look at the kinds of fish he had got. ‘What is this?’, he asked the fisherman, pointing. ‘Catfish, sir.’, he said. ‘What are they?’, he asked pointing to another net. ‘They are the same, sir.’

‘No, let that be. These look better. Give me these. Four of them.’

As he finished his business with the fisherman, he turned back to look at Sanvi and held up the fish to irritate her. She was nowhere to be seen. Thinking she might have gotten up to walk around and feel the breeze, he looked all around but couldn’t find her.

Then, behind two casuarina trees, he saw her being carried away by four men. Two held her legs, one her torso and the other was shutting her mouth so she couldn’t scream for help. Daya was infuriated at the scene of other men even touching her, let alone do this sort of atrocity. He ran. He must save her.

He was in such rage that he could have easily torn off their limbs. When Vennila Kishore was feeding her just a slice of cake he became so enraged, one can imagine how much rage he would have for these four men, abducting his beloved right in front of his eyes. He chased them but by the time he was close, they had already put her in a jeep, waiting for her to be brought. At the moment

she was in the back of the jeep, it sped through the shore.

Daya, being an intelligent officer, gave up the emotionally charged chase on legs, and got on his bike to chase the kidnappers.

‘Leave me!’, screamed Sanvi, kicking as hard as she could at the men sitting with her in the trunk of the jeep. It stopped at an isolated spot on the beach, and they took her out of the vehicle. The three men holding her thought Daya had given up. They took her close to an unused boat, holding her tightly against it. She tried kicking and shouting, but to no avail. Daya, who saw the jeep stop, parked the bike and quickly ran after these men. One of the men took out a large knife and was about to thrust it into her neck. Sanvi, who saw her life ending within a few seconds, closed her eyes. Flashes of memories and people ran through her mind as she believed this was the end for good. She pictured images of her mother feeding her, her house with all the dogs and her other animals, Daya teasing her, and her grandma coaxing her; everything was flashing through her mind like a continuous picture strip. Tears rolled down her cheeks. All this happened in less than two seconds, as the man with the knife was positioning himself to kill her with the thick, black weapon.

Daya ran to the boat and, seeing what was happening, kicked the knife-wielder on his back with his heavy boots. The man fell on the ground and the knife slipped away from his hand. The other men tried to thrash Daya, one after another. He maintained a fearless face as he was pushed against the boat. He fell to the ground, his mouth bleeding. As he tried to defend himself, another car zoomed into the spot, and another group of men got down from the car. Daya, looking at them, thought that everything was over that day. He feared he would lose Sanvi. From the car, Waltair Vasu got down with a gun in his hand wearing the same shorts and t-shirt. ‘Hey Daya! Forget her.’, said Vasu. To the other men who had come with him on this jeep, he said ‘Hey! Go, hold him back. Quickly!’ The men joined those who had been fighting Daya, and held him back.

Daya couldn't relieve himself of their grip and felt terrible at having to see all this happen to Sanvi. He regretted the fact that he didn't use the gun. It wasn't his official weapon and he was at complete liberty to use it. All this would have been avoided if he had just used the gun. Daya couldn't accept that he had been so stupid to think he could beat them up alone. Vasu walked towards Sanvi, who was trying to get up on her knees. When Daya was taking on the men, she had been pushed down vigorously and now as she was trying to stand up, and she realized she had sprained her neck and her ankles.

As Sanvi got to her feet, Vasu hurried to her, turned her around and held her face in his left hand. He pointed the gun to her mouth and Daya screamed 'No Vasu, please don't kill her! Is this what you will do to your friend?'

'I will do anything else for you Daya, but don't ask me for this! Please forget her, I will get you better girls!', urged Vasu as he held her hair tighter than before.

'I love her, Vasu. Don't do this, please!' Daya begged. As he pleaded Vasu he also realized how much Sanvi meant to Daya. Daya grew up with a very egoistic outlook. He would rather die than be submissive. He thought that he wouldn't beg to anyone, even if he was about to lose his own life. But he did that for Sanvi. Of course, this realization was of no use, for his dear Sanvi was going to be killed in front of his eyes.

Vasu, who was looking at Daya all this while, turned his face to look at Sanvi to shoot her. Daya tried hard to relieve himself from the men. Vasu screamed 'Hey! What did I ask you to do and what have you done?' He looked at his men and said, 'Whom did I ask you to bring?' He ran to Daya telling his men 'Leave him you idiots!'

‘Sorry, brother! Some major mistake has happened. Please forgive me.’ Now that his hands were free, Daya swirled his hands around to hit the men who were holding him back all this while. He ran to Sanvi.

‘What mistake?’

‘I had told these idiots to bring some other girl, and they have brought your girlfriend.’ One of the men who was holding Daya walked a few steps towards Vasu and said, ‘No brother. She was sitting on the bike you told us about. We checked the number plate twice. It is exactly the same one you gave us. We followed the bike to the beach, and as he was standing away from her, we picked her up at the right moment.’ Daya held him tightly by his collar and said, ‘Why would you bring anybody who sits on the bike? Will you not check the face before you do something stupid?’ Vasu walked up to them and tried taking Daya’s hands off his man. ‘Didn’t I tell you it was a mistake? I am sorry! Very sorry.’

Sanvi ran to Daya and embraced him tight. Vasu kept apologizing to make sure things didn’t get out of control. ‘Forgive me, brother. I’m so sorry.’ Daya looked at Sanvi, who was bleeding. Blood trickled from her eyebrows and some of it had already dried up, making a very unpleasant sight of someone so breathtakingly beautiful. ‘Sorry brother. Sorry. Sorry!’, said Vasu. ‘She is my life. My girlfriend.’, cried Daya. Vasu brought his palms together and said again, ‘Sorry! Take her to the doctor. Come meet at the guest house after you drop her at home.’

‘You would have taken the knives out on her!’, Daya screamed looking at the men standing there.

‘Hey you! Apologise!’, ordered Vasu looking at the guy who was holding the

knife to Sanvi's neck earlier.

'Yes, are you sorry?', asked Daya as he kicked him aside, holding Sanvi tighter to his chest.

'Hey! All of you, come apologise!', said Vasu to his men.

'Sorry brother. Very sorry.', said his men as Vasu joined them again to apologize. 'Brother, take her home. Look at her, she is very scared.', said Vasu. It now occurred to Daya that she would only get more agitated if they stayed there longer and left immediately. 'You come to the guest house. We will talk.', said Vasu getting back into his car.

After taking her to the hospital and getting her wounds dressed, Daya dropped her off at her house. 'Don't be worried about all this, Sanvi. I will take care of it. If people at home ask you what happened, tell them that you fell off the bike.' She got off the bike and stood next to him. She came close to him and hugged him from the side. As she put her head on his shoulder, he could feel her tears. Taking her head into his hands, he said, 'Don't be scared, Sanvi. I will manage this. Go inside and sleep. You need to get some rest.' Sanvi turned around and said, 'Take care of yourself. I love you.' She went into her house and locked the door behind her. Daya left in peace.

The following morning, Daya went to the station and saw that the woman who had complained about her missing daughter was sitting there and sobbing. He was still thinking about what happened the previous day. The fact that it happened on her birthday when he had taken her out, and right in front of his eyes, hurt him even more. The thought that he couldn't have done anything to save her life unsettled him. He was reminded of the powerlessness he had felt in his youth.

The woman, waiting to meet the sub-inspector, ran to him and asked if they had found any details about her missing daughter. Daya, who was already upset and annoyed, asked her, 'Who is Arun?' The woman kept staring at him for a second, trying to recall the person, for the name sounded very familiar. Daya increased his volume. 'I asked: who is Arun?'

'My daughter's friend, sir.'

'How do they know each other?'

'They studied together, sir. Why?'

'Answer my questions first.' The woman was intimidated by Daya's voice and his sturdy physique. She nodded her head. 'Where does he stay?'

'Gajuwaka, sir.', the woman replied trembling at the thought of the multiple possibilities of what might have happened to her daughter.

'That's right. His house is right behind the Yellamma temple at Gajuwaka. He too has been missing since the day your daughter disappeared.' The woman, already comprehending what Daya was implying, felt anxious and started sweating heavily. 'Do you understand what has happened? Your daughter has eloped with Arun! The minute the money in his purse and the jewellery on her neck is used up, she will come back home. You can't bring up your daughter properly, so you come to the police station expecting us to take care of her. The case has been solved, right? Now go back home!', said an exhausted Daya. He walked into his

room least worried about the harshness of his words. She broke down and sobbed profusely. After a few minutes, she managed to get up and leave the station. She continued crying as she thought of how she was going to live alone without her loving daughter.

Chapter 8

Early next morning, Daya woke up and walked out of his room into the balcony. The help had prepared coffee for him. He sat on the chair outside and looked around while sipping his coffee. As he looked at the pool beneath the balcony, he saw a girl. He got up from the chair and went close to the wall of the balcony to get a closer look at her. It was Sanvi. He was surprised to see her standing there that early in the morning. ‘Sanvi!’, he called out. ‘What are you doing there? Come inside.’

He walked back into the house and came down to meet her. ‘What happened, Sanvi? Why are you here so early in the morning?’, he asked her as he met her on the stairs. ‘I wanted to meet you and talk to you about something important. I didn’t sleep the whole night and I didn’t want to talk to you about this over the phone.’ They walked up to the sofa in the hall and sat down close to each other.

‘Tell me. What is it? Have you been thinking about what happened the day before? Didn’t I ask you to forget it? Think of it as a nightmare, Sanvi. Forget it completely and everything will be fine again.’

‘They tried to kill me because they mistook me for some other girl. But what if they did kill me?’

‘But they didn’t, right? You are fine now.’

‘But what if they did? What would have happened? What would you do? What would have happened to my mother, my grandma? What would have happened

to all our lives?’

‘Yes. But now all of us are doing great. You are still here and we have our dreams and lives. Forget whatever happened, Sanvi.’

‘Okay. But what will happen if they find the girl they are looking for? They will kill her, right?’ said Sanvi. Daya looked at her and didn’t answer. ‘She must have her own family, her own dreams. What will happen to all of them then?’

Daya had no comforting words to offer. He hugged her with her head against his chest. ‘Is it not a sin to kill another human being, Daya?’ Sanvi asked innocently. ‘I kept thinking of her all through the night and I couldn’t sleep at all. I was up crying all night. I don’t know who that girl is, but she must live. As a sincere police officer, you should save her life. This is the birthday gift I want from you.’, she said earnestly before leaving abruptly. Daya tried beckoning her, but she walked away.

As Daya was getting ready for the day, a terrible chase was happening in Vizag. A young woman nearly thirty was being chased by two jeeps, both full of men. She pulled up her long skirt that kept falling as she ran, and looked back to check how far behind they were. They had come pretty close, but the will to live made her run faster. She ran into a huge factory and kept running through the length of it. Rain from the previous night had made the ground soft. The mud from her flip-flops hit her blue churidaar, splashing distinct brown spots on her back.

The jeeps were closing in on her. She ran between two tracks, as coaches carrying concrete from one end of the plant to the another went past her. She kept running as fast as she could, looking for a place to hide. Suddenly, another jeep from the front rushed in and stopped across the road, blocking her path. She

freaked out and couldn't go any further. Her heart was pounding hard against her chest. She could hear it. She imagined the worst possible tortures and she didn't want to face any such humiliation.

From the jeep, a man wearing a checkered shirt tucked into his jeans and thick leather boots, stepped out. His hair was neatly trimmed and he was sporting a pair of black sunglasses. He came close to the girl and pulled out his revolver. By now, Waltair Vasu had arrived in his car. Looking at the woman being surrounded, he seemed delighted, and he walked towards the three jeeps that had encircled the young woman to prevent her from running away.

As Vasu walked towards them, he saw a man by the third jeep and asked, 'Hey! What are you doing here? Did I not ask you to come to the guest house?' Daya was standing by this jeep. He loaded the revolver, gave it to the young woman and said, 'Take this gun with you and if someone comes near you, shoot him dead. I will take care of it later.'

'Hey! Do you understand what you are doing? Why are you giving her a gun? Are you mad?', shouted Vasu. Daya brought his hands to his hips and stood there with utter irreverence to Vasu. 'Don't you understand what is happening? It was because of her that we beat your girlfriend that day!'

'Leave this girl.', said Daya sternly. Vasu was not only surprised at what Daya was saying but angry too.

'What?', said Vasu, perplexed, pretending not to understand.

'Leave this girl, brother,' said Daya, emphasizing on the word "brother" more

than ever before.

‘Why? Is this also your girlfriend?’, asked Vasu. The men standing around him laughed.

‘If something happens to her, my girlfriend will be in considerable pain. So whether I like it or not, I have to save this girl’s life. That is my fate.’, said Daya with an anxiety building up inside him, for he had to go against Vasu for Sanvi’s sake. He had made a helpful acquaintance in Vasu, and was perturbed at having to disrupt it for the sake of his love.

Daya tried explaining to Vasu, hoping he would let her go. ‘If I kill her your love will get into trouble, but if I let her live, my whole life will be a problem.’, said Vasu getting enraged at Daya’s obstinacy. Vasu turned to one of his men and said, ‘Hey! What are you doing? Go get her now!’ As the man walked close to Daya and tried moving past him to the girl, Daya held his arm, twisted it around and kicked him with his thick boots, so hard that he was pushed back a few feet and fell right in front of Vasu. That was a huge blow to Vasu, who had never seen his men getting beaten up so easily.

‘Hey! What have you done?’, asked Vasu, surprised.

‘Did I not ask you to stay away from her?’

‘But you are showing me a different side, all of a sudden! Things were fine till now, what’s all this suddenly?’ Vasu was still finding it hard to come to terms with Daya’s reaction.

‘There are so many other sides of me too. Dont make me show all of them.’, warned Daya.

‘Hey, idiot! I have four dogs in my farm house. And the only difference between them and you is that I give them dog food, but I throw money at you!’, blurted out Vasu, something Daya already knew. But to be compared to a dog in front of so many people was not something Daya would take kindly.

‘You have touched the wrong spot, Vasu. This is something you should never mess with. Did I not tell you my ego is all around me? Did I also not tell you that you should only pamper it, but never tamper with it? You have tampered with it now.’ Daya removed his shades and threw them to the ground in anger. ‘The light is now turned on! You are all in danger.’

‘Hey! Didn’t you hear him?’, said Vasu to his men. ‘His light is on it seems, go turn it off.’

Three men ran to Daya, each of them getting kicked and punched back to Vasu’s feet. Vasu, seeing the blood oozing from his men’s mouth with just one kick, stood there trembling now. In all these years, nobody had dared to do this in front of Vasu. This change and challenge to his power was unbearable for him.

Daya, who brimmed with anger at being provoked, said, ‘Username: Daya, Password: Police. If you have the guts try coming in my range and log in.’ As he beat up others too, Vasu walked closer to Daya. Daya held the fingers of one of the men and twisted it around so much that Vasu could hear the noise of the fingers being contorted and breaking. ‘Hey! Hey! You said so many things about friendship? Is this what your friendship is?’

‘What friendship? There is no friendship between us. I am the hero and you are the villain!’, Daya shouted as he kicked the man away.

‘Hey! You were in some obscure city and it was I who brought you to Vizag! And this is how you treat me?’

‘Don’t act like you did a huge favour to me. You wanted someone who will let you run your businesses without any trouble. You wanted someone who will get you out of trouble if you were caught doing your illegal business. And I have done more than enough of that. I did the job you wanted to get done. I got paid for it. I was yet another dog in your farmhouse, right? Now why are you talking about friendship to me?’

Vasu, disappointed that Daya was standing his ground, ran to the car, picked a huge knife and ran back towards Daya to kill him right there, and sort things once and for all. As he took a few steps forward, Daya promptly took his revolver out and pointed it straight at Vasu’s head. Vasu had to quickly reduce his pace, stop right in front of Daya and drop the knife. ‘This is inspector Daya speaking. Listen to me carefully.’, said Daya as he moved from that spot to his car. ‘Your regime is over. In Vizag there will be Waltair but no Vasu. From today I will interrupt you in all your pursuits. Every single illegal trade that you do will be disturbed. I will make you sleepless. I will sleep in your mind instead.’, Daya promised.

‘Hey! You will fight with me?’, Vasu smirked. ‘After all, you are a cop. You know who I am? You, a small baby, want to fight me?’

‘I am not a baby. I’m Prahalad. You are Hiranyakashipu. Wait and watch what I

can do. If two sides fight with each other it is a battle, but one attacks another, it is conquest. This is Daya's conquest over Vasu!', he shouted aloud firing four bullet shots into the air. He got into the jeep and left the place with the girl.

The next day, Vasu was sitting in his bamboo chair with his usual three-fourth jeans and a floral shirt. All his men were sitting around him, staring at one another, not knowing what to say or do. They had always come to his house in the morning, got drunk, spent a happy time with the women there and indulged in the other pleasures Vasu had arranged for his men. There was a spa, a gym, a swimming pool, and a games arena where they played pool and other sports, half the time without knowing the rules. After all they were all rowdies, so they made up their own rules to play the games. Today, in contrast, they were all sitting around Vasu, not doing anything else.

The women were standing by the doors looking at these men sit so dejected. In all these years nothing of this sort had happened, and the women realized the gravity of the situation. The rowdies were sad not only because Vasu was let down, but also because they knew they would lose all the luxuries if Daya triumphed over Vasu.

Vasu's brother left his car outside and came into the hall. 'Brother, we searched for him everywhere, stations, restaurants...he is nowhere to be found. You think he got scared of us and left Vizag by now?'

'Are you crazy? You should have been there yesterday. Ask them what he did and what he said. He has got a new strength all of a sudden and he is more fearless than usual now.'

'What shall we do now?'

‘Someone call him.’ One of the men there dialled Daya’s number.

‘He is disconnecting the call, brother.’, the man told Vasu, just as angered as he was.

‘What does he think he is doing? Who the hell does he think he is?’ said Vasu throwing his bottle of beer on the ground.

Meanwhile, Daya was standing at the port with Murthy. He had asked Murthy to drive to the port early in the morning. Daya recollected to him the previous day’s events, in particular his best taunts like, “‘Username: Daya, Password: Police!’”, and “‘Your bad time has started. In Vizag there will be Waltair but no Vasu.’” Daya quoted all these very vividly and even recited them to Murthy a second time.

He kicked the wheel of the car and sat on the engine. ‘What was I thinking Murthy? I don’t have even little bit of control over what I talk. My temper is horrible.’ Murthy, who was happy with the split between the two, tried to hide his joy. ‘Everyone has an ego, Murthy. But why do I alone have it all around, like Wifi? You should have seen the drama I created there yesterday. How much I spoke!’, he exclaimed to Murthy who was staring at the sea.

‘Such a nice guy he is! He brought me from some tiny town to this beautiful city, gave me a flat and so much money, and what do I do in return? I should talk less, right? First I beat his guys up then tell him I will make him sleepless. “I will sleep in your mind instead”, I told him.’, Daya said this with a mocking tone.

They took a small boat to the sea. Daya continued, 'What is all this talk, Murthy? Has he not given me a nice flat to sleep in? And like I have some other place to sleep, I tell him I will sleep in his mind! How stupid! Will he not be hurt then?'

Neither of them said a word as the boat went further into the sea. In less than ten minutes, Daya started off again. 'What's all this conquest business, Murthy? Like I am some king. He has been the king of Vizag for so many decades, and I who came hardly a few months ago want to conquer him? He is a nice guy, Murthy. That is why I am still alive. If I were in his place I would have killed anyone who talked like I did yesterday.'

On the other hand, Vasu was getting increasingly frustrated with Daya's attitude. He told his brothers, 'Listen. I've had enough. Go straight to the police station and wait till he comes. The minute he walks in, shoot him. Here, take these.', he said, presenting his brothers with guns.

As they were leaving the hall, Vasu shouted, 'Hey! Wait, wait. He has sent a message.' He unlocked his screen and read it. 'East or west, friendship is the best.' it read. 'Look at what kind of message he has sent. East or west, friendship is the best, it seems. What do I do with him?', he said, confused. As he was talking he received another message, which he didn't notice. One of his men said 'Brother, looks like you got another one.'

'Ours is not a conflict between brothers. It is camaraderie between brothers.' it read. 'Camaraderie, it seems. Bullshit!'

'Brother, I think he fears us and is now regretting whatever he did yesterday. He might be scared that we will kill him.'

‘Yes. Now he would have realized that there is no Waltair without Vasu.’

Just then, Vasu received a call from the minister. ‘Why is this idiot calling me now?’, Vasu murmured as he answered right after.

‘Hey Vasu? What is wrong with you? It seems you are afraid of a small boy? You are not picking up calls and not answering messages? What is wrong with you?’ It was obvious that Daya had just twisted the story and told it in his favour to the minister.

‘Fear? I will kill him. I will kill him right now!’

‘Listen to me, Vasu. There will be hundreds of fights between human beings. We have to sit together and sort them out. I am getting him there at your guest house in less than ten minutes. Make the necessary arrangements.’ He put the phone down.

‘Haan! Bring him! Bring him!’, said Vasu, excited at getting a chance to meet Daya in person, and having hurt him enough to satisfy his damaged ego. ‘He is coming with the ministers, it seems. Come! Come!’, he said to his men and moved out of the hall.

Two Dusters came into Vasu's compound after thirty minutes, Daya and the minister exited from one of them. The minute Vasu saw Daya, he took his gun out and started shooting. Daya, who anticipated something like this, quickly hid behind the minister. Vasu kept trying hard to aim at Daya, but to no avail.

The minister walked right in front of Vasu and snatched the gun away from Vasu's hands. 'Are you mad? What if I get shot? What has happened to you all of a sudden?'

'He has irritated me so much, sir! Why do you think I would want to shoot him otherwise?', said Vasu, trying to explain his erratic behaviour.

'Forget whatever has happened so far. Why do you think I have come? So that both of you can resolve your differences. If we fight amongst ourselves, how will we make money? Do you understand how much damage you are doing to all of us by fighting with him?', said the minister. Now that the gun was gone from Vasu's hands, Daya came out confidently. 'Look at him. How much he repents whatever happened between you too.', said the minister.

Daya threw his arms wide open and shook his head gesturing Vasu to come and hug him. Vasu, furious at the minister for taking Daya's side, did not move an inch. 'Sir, I will not talk to him unless he hugs me.', said Daya as he continued to stand with open arms. Vasu looked at the minister's face and then at Daya's. 'Take the poor kid, hug him and console him!', said the minister.

As Vasu hugged Daya, he smelt his shirt. 'Don't smell me like that. It makes me uncomfortable.', said Daya. Vasu was too used to smelling people and refused to stop. Daya, who hated not being listened to, bit his shoulder. Vasu moved away from Daya and shouted, 'He bit me! He bit me!'

'He is a small boy, Vasu. It might have been his teeth. Why do you always misunderstand him? Anyway, everything is settled now, right? Come, let's all have a drink to this reconciliation.'

They sat and took a glass each and as one of Vasu's men poured the drinks, Vasu who was sitting next to the minister and right in front of Daya, looked into Daya's eyes with hatred and asked, 'Where is the girl?', Daya had been looking into Vasu's eyes but looked away when he asked this. Vasu grew more impatient with him and said louder, 'Hey! I am asking you! Where is the girl?'

'I have left the city where I grew up and come to a new city where I don't know anybody. For whom have I come? For your good only, right? You will get frustrated at me and try to take revenge on me?', said Daya.

'Isn't it wrong?' said the minister.

'Hey, you be silent. Can't you see he is changing the topic? Tell me now. Where is the girl?'

'Listen. I haven't called anyone brother in my entire life. I called only you "my brother". And you will wage a war on your own brother?'

'Who started the whole thing? You or me?'

The minister hadn't realized the gravity of their hostility. He urged, 'Stop fighting like kids. Vasu, you must have started the whole thing. Why would that small boy lie?'

'Who is a boy? This one? He said he would give up his life for our friendship.'

Daya, who almost took it as a cue, got up, walked a couple of steps towards Vasu's chair and said, 'Did I not give? Where did I shoot the gun the other day? I shot it in the air. Did I shoot it in your heart? What would have happened if I shot you in your chest? So, did I not you give you a life? What are you talking about now?'

'Hey don't try to confuse me! Tell me where the girl is.' Vasu persisted.

Daya turned to one of Vasu's brothers and asked, 'Hey, why are you so silent? Only five of you are brothers? Am I not one among you?'

Vasu raised his voice: 'Will you not tell me what happened to the girl?' The minister was losing his mind and said, 'Whatever the problem is, we will talk only after we drink. All of you, sit down and drink first.'

After a few minutes of drinking, Vasu asked again, 'Where is the girl?'

'Hey why do you keep asking the same thing? My girlfriend asked me to save that girl as a birthday gift. So I saved her from you, and gave her to my girlfriend. That is all!'

'So if your girlfriend asks for my dead body tomorrow, will you kill me and gift my body to her?'

Daya threw his glass on the floor and said, 'Who did I meet first? You or her?'

How can you even ask these stupid questions? It doesn't matter what happens to my other relationships, but you are more important to me. And this is how you talk to me? You think I will kill you for her sake? Is that how much you trust me? I am deeply hurt.'

'Why do you hurt him like this?', said the Minister.

'I am deeply hurt by what has happened. I can't talk to you for another twenty-four hours. Let me live my life the way I want to. Talk to me after a day.', said Daya, who was waiting all this while for a chance to finish off on an emotional note. He quickly walked out of the guesthouse.

Chapter 9

‘What did you do to the girl?’, asked the old man, who was still patiently and eagerly listening to Daya’s story. ‘The same day, I took her to Sanvi’s house. Sanvi had no clue as to who this girl was and why I took her there all of a sudden. It then occurred to me that I could have taken any random girl to her house, and told her that was the girl she asked me to save. That would have still counted as a birthday gift, and I wouldn’t have had to cross swords with Vasu said Daya.’

‘Then why didn’t you do it?’, asked the old man curiously, for having heard Daya’s story until this, he wouldn’t be surprised if Daya did something of this sort. Daya smiled a little at the corner of his mouth and said, ‘You know, I haven’t had to tell anyone anything since childhood. No one cared if I ate or not, how I dressed and what I was doing. I never missed anybody in life nor was I ever missed by anyone in life. I had to cry and smile alone, and prove to the outside world that my existence is as important as anybody else’s. But now I have Sanvi. I love her and if I treat her like I treat anybody else, then what’s the use in me telling myself I love her? What good am I doing her for not being one of those random strangers in my life, and choosing instead to stay with me?’

‘Yeah. Makes sense.’, said the old man.

That day when he took her to Sanvi’s house, Sanvi was busy feeding the birds. ‘She loves animals a lot. I think sometimes she will give me up if she had to choose between animals and me.’, said Daya to Lakshmi. Sanvi quickly ran to the sofa they were sitting on. ‘Sanvi, this is your birthday gift. Lakshmi.’ Sanvi walked to Lakshmi and Lakshmi got up. She folded her hands and thanked Sanvi for saving her life. Sanvi was not used to people crying and thanking her. She ran to hug her.

As she kept crying, Sanvi pat her back and said, 'Daya is here for us. He will stop those guys. You don't have to worry any longer.'

'Thank you so much, Sanvi. If not for you I would have been dead by now. All my dreams would have gone unrealized. I can't even think of what my family would do without me.'

Sanvi took her to the terrace along with Daya and Murthy as the animals made a racket, making it difficult for them to hear each other. There she gestured Daya to move away a little so that she could talk to Lakshmi alone. Daya took Murthy and went close to the wall while Sanvi made Lakshmi sit on the opposite wall. 'Tell me what happened, said Sanvi. Lakshmi started crying. Wiping away her tears, she said, 'Please don't ask me anything now.'

'Nothing will happen to you. You are in safe hands.' Sanvi turned to look at Daya. Lakshmi smiled and said, 'You are very lucky.' Sanvi smiled at getting an endorsement of her choice.

The next day as Daya was sitting in his office at the police station drinking hot tea when a white Scorpio zoomed into the Police compound. Daya, who was very stubborn about ruling his domain, was very unhappy about that car breaking open into his field so irreverently. As he looked out of the window to see who it was, he had a nasty fright. It was Vasu himself.

Vasu never went to places like that alone. He always sent his men and if the issue remained unresolved, he went in person. Daya, already worried of what would happen to him and his job, was even more worked up to see this man in a flowery shirt and three-fourth jeans walk into his station. His clothes and his

attitude seemed to be completely out of sync. Without any formalities, he walked into Daya's room, took a chair nearby and sat on it with his legs stretched up on the table. 'The twenty-four hours are over, sir. Shall we talk now?', he said to Daya.

Daya didn't respond, and kept staring at Vasu. Annoyed at his indifference, Vasu said, 'Hey! I'm talking to you. Tell me. Where is the girl?' Scratching the back of his neck as though this wasn't worth his attention, Daya slowly turned to Vasu, narrowed his eyes and said, 'Why do you want that girl?' The tone clearly conveyed what Daya wanted to ask. Vasu understood that Daya wasn't going to give the girl away that easily. He answered, 'To play hopscotch. Now you know why I want her, don't waste my time. Give her to me now!'

Daya kept on looking at him without any change in expression. Vasu, irked at this, shouted, 'You don't seem to understand the gravity of the issue! You are thinking it's heroic to save the girl and give her to your girlfriend as a birthday gift. But you don't realize that you are playing with the precious lives of my dear brothers.' Changing his tone, he said pleadingly, 'Now listen, Daya. That girl has a proof against my brothers. If that comes out, then they are done for! That will be end to my brothers lives.'

'What did your brothers do?'

Vasu, not wanting to further jeopardize his condition, said, 'Why do you want all of that?', making sure he didn't spill anything out. 'Just tell me where the girl is. I need to finish her off as soon as possible.'

Daya figured out a way to please both Vasu and Sanvi at the same time. 'Why do you want to kill that girl for the sake of evidence?' After a dramatic pause where he expected Vasu to comprehend his thoughts, Daya continued, 'What is it that

you want? Evidence or the girl? Just the evidence, right? Then leave the issue to me I will get you the proof. But will you spare her life if you get the evidence?' Looking at how easy Daya was making the whole thing sound, Vasu said, 'But will she give the proof to you? Will she trust you?'

'If there is anybody in the world that this girl will trust right now, it is me. So leave everything to me, and I will bring it to you.', assured Daya confidently. 'My situation is exactly like hers. I am trusting you with my brothers' lives. Please bring it back to me!', pleaded Vasu.

'Murthy, start the jeep.', Daya ordered. 'Sir, what you are doing is unfair. You are cheating her, sir. She trusts only you, and you are breaking that trust.', said Murthy. Vasu's family is the only thing that stopped him at times from directly going and telling the victim about the atrocities that people in power so ruthlessly and legitimately committed. He couldn't tell Lakshmi directly about the conversation between Daya and Vasu, for he was scared that if Daya was angered, he might even lose his job.

'Don't contradict me, Murthy. Just do as I say.' Murthy drove the jeep to Sanvi's house. Lakshmi was sitting and playing with the puppies. Daya went next to her and said, 'Ever since you came, you have been crying. Tell me what happened. Personally, and also as a police officer, I will try to do the best that I can to help you and ease your pain.' He sat next to her on a small stool and after a while when he knew she wasn't going to reply, he asked, 'Who are they? Why were they following you? If you think I'm trustworthy, then tell me.' Murthy, who was looking at the lovebirds inside the cage pecking away the grains, suddenly looked at him, shocked at the extent to which Daya was willing to go to get his work done.

'I work in New York. My mother and sister live here in Vizag. I had come back to India on a break. My sister who was supposed to come to receive me at the airport didn't turn up. Not knowing where she lived, we called her. The phone

was switched off. Mother and I searched and searched but still we couldn't find her whereabouts. After a week I got a phone call. It was her.'

'Your sister?'

'Yes. She told me, "I don't know if I will be alive to meet you. I was coming to the airport to pick you up that day. But on the way, Waltair Vasu's thugs kidnapped me." I was worried. I asked her if she knew the location.' Daya was wondering if it was the same case of the woman who had complained about a missing daughter. So Daya replied, 'She might have eloped with someone?'

'And?', asked Daya expecting her to go on. And Laxmi continued, she said, she got to know what hell was like, and that Vasu's brothers had shown what real torture was. She also told me that they were planning to kill her off that night, after one more round of gruesome torture. I was shocked to hear it and didn't completely understand her condition.'

'I asked her why she was talking about her death, to which she answered that death was hundred times better and preferable to the torture that they had subjected her to. She told me that they had recorded the whole of it, and that she saw them put the disk in a lorry.' Daya was now starting to understand why Vasu was behind it all these days. He guessed it might have been something to do with this DVD, for he kept saying all the while that Lakshmi had some proof with her, which, if came out, would jeopardize the lives of all his brothers.

'She then sent me the GPS from the phone she had used to call me. As these guys lay drunk there on the bed, the phone slipped from the bed, and that's how Deepti got access to the phone. By the time she sent the GPS, one of the guys had woken up and saw her using the phone. Hearing him scream at her, I started shivering. I heard him slap her so hard that the phone hit the wall. Then the call

ended.'

Murthy was appalled by what the brothers had done to Deepti. 'We went to the location Deepti had sent me. It was an old dilapidated factory. The garden was full of weeds and had a couple of rusted cars. I parked my car outside and ran in to see if I could save my dear sister. There was nobody inside the house. I searched all around, including the backyard and the terrace. She was not to be found anywhere.'

'I came back in and saw a lorry inside, along with a few other vehicles. A few scooters, bicycles and another car were inside the factory. There were also some welding machines. I was reminded of how Deepti told me that they burned the whole recording onto a DVD, which they hid in a lorry. I opened the door of the lorry and searched all around. I searched the back side, the pouches in front of the steering wheel, and I finally I found it under the seat,' she said.

She started crying at this point, burying her hands into her tender palms as she said, 'They killed my sister, sir. Raped her brutally, tortured her in unspeakable ways and after she was completely used up, rendered incapable of being harmed any more, they killed her.'

Murthy wiped the tears that welled up in his eyes and looked at Daya. Daya was looking down at the ground. 'Waltair Vasu's brothers have raped and killed my sister, sir. I trusted a media person with this issue and told him what happened, hoping he would do his job properly and try to get justice for my sister. But he was Vasu's man. He cheated me. He told the whole thing to Vasu. From that day, Vasu and his men have been chasing me. I keep running from house to house, hoping he would not find me. But they sniff me out like dogs and find me.'

'It was on one such occasion that you saved me. Until now I have been scared to

narrate the whole story to anybody. Given the illegal power and wealth he has, all the dogs in the street are wagging their tails for this inhuman creature. Cold-blooded, inhuman scumbags unfit to be spoken to and treated as normal human beings, are on the prowl in our city.' Murthy at this moment looked at Daya and shook his head. He truly wished that Daya would feel guilty, if not change, at least for now, after this girl in front of him clearly described the kind of villains Vasu and his men were.

Daya walked up to her and asked her, 'Does your mother have an American Visa?' She nodded. 'Then listen to what I tell you. It is not safe to stay here anymore. Vasu's men will be looking for you, and if you get caught, all the efforts you have made until now will have been for nothing. Take your mother and go to the US. Give me the DVD if you trust me enough. I will show these guys what hell is.'

Lakshmi did not know what to say.

'Do you trust me?', asked Daya earnestly. 'Tell me Lakshmi, do you trust that this brother will take the case to the court and get justice delivered for our sister?'

'If there is anybody I trust in the world right now, it's you.', cried Lakshmi. Murthy said nothing, looking at the deception that Daya was subjecting Lakshmi to.

'Then come with me, let's go home.' Murthy had to start the jeep again and not say a word of what he actually wanted to tell Lakshmi.

As they got down from the jeep and opened the gate of the house, Lakshmi said, 'Don't tell my mother anything about all this. She doesn't know any of it. I haven't told her. She has been told by the police that Deepti eloped with a friend.' Daya nodded his head with a hidden guilt and walked into the house with Lakshmi, followed by Murthy who kept mumbling to himself about the pathetic scene in front of his eyes.

Deepti's mother came out and as soon as she saw Daya, she recognized his face. 'Why would the SI come to our house unless he has found out more about the whereabouts of my daughter?', she thought to herself and ran to him. 'Tell me, sir. Have you found out anything about my child?', she asked. Daya and Murthy both recognized her face clearly. Daya stood there with a slight trace of guilt. He felt he had neglected a serious case. He couldn't gather courage to lie again to her mother. Murthy stood there in fury, staring at Daya as he said, 'Take your mother inside.'

'Amma, come inside. I have got an urgent call from my office. We need to leave immediately to the US.', said Lakshmi to her mother. Taking a cigarette out of his pocket, Daya walked parallel to the compound wall. He called Vasu and said, 'Immediately book two business class flights to the US. I'm sending off the mother and daughter to America.'

'Hey! But what happened to the DVD? I want the DVD.'

'You first book the tickets. DVD will come automatically.' Murthy was still staring at Daya in disgust. Daya, who finished his call, turned to Murthy and saw the look on his face. Daya who hated being looked down upon was now upset by Murthy's holier-than-thou facial expression. 'Why are you looking at me like that, Murthy? Don't give me that disgusted look. I'm saving both mother and daughter now. If I don't do this, they will find them and kill them both. Why do you never see my side?' I will send them off to the US, take the DVD and take it straight to Vasu. This is the best I can do. Nobody else can come up with

anything better than this. Stop looking at me like that with so much disgust.’, he told Murthy and turned away.

He turned back to find Murthy still staring. ‘Hey! Did I not tell you to stop looking at me like that? Give up, Murthy. Now don’t stand in front of me. Leave this place immediately. Go back to the station.’ Murthy lost any respect he had for him and stared at him again with the same disgust, before leaving.

The same evening, all the arrangements were made and Lakshmi was taken to the airport along with her mother. From the airport, Daya called Sanvi. He wanted to express his love for her and win her heart. ‘Hello Sanvi. Everything has been solved. No problems. Lakshmi and her mother are leaving from the airport now and with that they will be safe.’

‘Is she next to you?’ asked Sanvi. ‘Will you give her the phone for a minute?’ She wanted to talk to Lakshmi once before her flight to the US, from which her return couldn’t be assured. Lakshmi took the phone. ‘Hi, Lakshmi. Happy journey. Give him your American number and I will take it from him to talk to you.’, she said.

As they were waiting for the checking to be done, Daya received a call from Vasu. ‘Did you get the DVD?’

‘No. Not yet. But wait patiently. I will get it for sure.’ In less than ten minutes he called him three times. ‘Did she give you the DVD or not?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Get it immediately and come to the guest house.’

Lakshmi was standing in the queue with her mother, and as they were about to leave, Daya called Lakshmi and said, ‘Call me once you reach New York.’ Lakshmi nodded her head.

Acting as if he didn’t really care about it and was asking it only because Lakshmi had told him earlier, he asked coolly, ‘Also, you said you will give some DVD?’ Lakshmi was in disbelief, and asked herself if she thought if she could give him the DVD. But she realized she had no other option, and that Daya was her only hope of getting anywhere near justice.

Her mother turned suddenly and said, ‘Son, we are going away to the US now. I don’t know when we will return. I will always think of my daughter. Please visit my house occasionally because Deepti might come back. And if she does come back, tell her I don’t hate her. Tell her that her mother has no anger about whatever happened, and that she will always love her.’ Daya realized the pain that her mother was going through, and the unbearable pain that Lakshmi was dealing with, for she knew exactly what had happened to Deepti but couldn’t share it. He gulped a huge lump down his throat and stood there motionless. ‘Yes, madam. I think it is getting late for your flight, so on you go.’, he said, having nothing else to say.

After sending them inside, Daya turned around to leave. He had to go to Vasu’s house immediately. That thought made him miserable. He was trying to justify his actions to himself. He tried telling himself that if not him, then someone else would have taken the DVD to Vasu. He at least saved their lives while anyone else would have killed them. As he was convincing and justifying himself, he heard someone scream ‘Brother!’ loudly in a familiar voice.

Daya turned around to see and found Lakshmi. She had come out running in search of him. As Daya stood there, not saying anything and tightly holding on to the DVD, she came running to him. She started crying and said, 'Forty days. They raped my sister brutally for forty days. This was not just rape and murder.' Lakshmi's voice was still fresh in her memory. 'When she had called from the factory before being killed, she said, "They are burning my body, sister. They are burning me everywhere. They burnt her skin inch by inch with acid. And on the birthday of Gandhi! They kidnapped her exactly on Gandhi's birthday.'

Daya realized Gandhi Jayanti was significant in his life too. As Lakshmi stood there explaining how brutal these men had been, Daya zoned out. His first day in Vizag came back to him. He had taken up this post on Gandhi Jayanti. What was disturbing him was the fact that his first act in Vizag was to release Vasu's brothers from jail. He couldn't accept the fact that those guys went out of jail and kidnapped a girl right away, and tortured her ruthlessly for forty days. The thought that if he had kept them imprisoned and not let them flee, Deepti's rape would have been avoided; it was too harsh to handle.

'They shouldn't be spared, brother. They should get punished by the law. The entire nation should know what they did, and everyone should learn what happens if they dare to even think of destroying a woman's life.', urged Lakshmi. 'Watch the DVD once, brother. I don't understand how they get the freedom to roam around in the country like this.' Daya knew exactly how they got the freedom to roam around like that. He couldn't stand his past actions now. All that he had carefully kept away from his conscience and found smart ways of justifying seemed unpardonable to him now.

'Please don't spare them, brother. My conscience says that if at all my sister can get justice, it is through you. Only when that happens I will come back to India.' With that, she ran back to her mother. Daya stood there, broken at the kind of human being he had become and at the blind brotherly trust Lakshmi had given him. Vasu kept calling, but Daya didn't pick up. 'It seems they have caught a

new bird, so they are busy.' Vasu had said when Daya visited him for the first time in his bungalow, when he had asked where his brothers were.

After letting them run away on, he had gone straight to Vasu's guesthouse. Little did he know that this 'new bird' was Deepti. This hit him hard. He couldn't handle it. He sat down on a bench with his face sunk deep into his palms, as though he didn't want to show the world his face ever again.

Chapter 10

‘Do you understand what has happened because of you?’, asked the old man. ‘A girl has been brutally raped and killed!’ Daya didn’t answer and kept staring at him.

‘What happened later?’

‘I took my jeep from the airport and drove straight to the police station. Murthy didn’t accompany me that day as a few files had to be urgently sorted out. I left him at the station so that the work could be done. When I went to the police station, Murthy was surprised, and kept staring at me as I walked towards a bench. After I put the DVD on the bench right next to me, I checked my phone to see if Sanvi had called me. Instead I saw that Vasu had called me fourteen times. To this day, I still wonder how I didn’t hear the calls when I was driving back home. I’m the kind of person who is woken up by the smallest of noise. Even if you call me at midnight, I will wake up and attend the call.’, Daya told the old man.

But that day as Daya drove back to the station, he was so immersed in thought he didn’t even hear his phone ringing. On arriving at the station, he put the DVD next to him on the bench. Murthy was surprised to see him there, as Daya had told him his plan. Vasu, on the other hand was stamping his feet on the ground, to let out the anger was building up inside him. Daya, who was updating him about all the progress, had suddenly stopped picking up calls.

Vasu called him again as he sat on the bench. Daya saw the call this time, but didn’t pick up. Murthy found this a bit strange. ‘Sir? What happened? You said you would go to Waltair Vasu’s place, and have come here instead? Weren’t you

supposed to give the disk to...him...before you came here?', asked a reluctant Murthy. He hated Daya more now. Daya silently thought of what he had said before that. Once, when Murthy was taunting Daya about his cruelty, Daya said, 'Stop talking like murders and rapes are happening because of me.' Knowing that that both a rape and murder had happened because of him, Daya became uncomfortable. He started shaking his legs uncontrollably. Murthy had never seen Daya do this. He always managed to be bold enough to cross his legs and look into peoples eyes when talking. But now, he didn't look at anybody.

Murthy was still confused to see Daya back in the station. 'Sir, you told me you will go to Waltair Vasu's. Why have you come back here with the DVD?' Vasu made another attempt to talk to Daya and get the DVD. The phone buzzed with a strong vibration that made a muffled, rhythmic sound. Murthy looked into the phone from where he stood. It was Waltair Vasu. Vasu's face with black shades flashed on the screen.

'Sir, it is Waltair Vasu. Why are you not picking up? What happened, sir? I don't understand what's happening.' Daya kept quiet and kept staring at a crack on the wall opposite him. A huge queue of ants was carrying particles of food into the crack. On top of the crack was the stem of a peepul tree. It had three leaves—small, light green, and tender. Slowly, tears welled up in Daya's eyes. They filled his eyes, and the image of the peepul stem and leaves became increasingly obscure. His eyes could no longer hold the weight of his conflict. They let go, and tears rolled across his cheeks.

Murthy watching all this, said, 'Sir, you are crying. What happened, sir? Tell me. I have never seen you cry.' Murthy, though sad for what was happening to Daya, was also surprised. His image of Daya had been of a cruel, heartless officer who exploited people to make as much money as possible. How could someone with such insensitivity and indifference to ethical norms start crying like a baby?

'Something happened at the airport, sir. Tell me what it is. I know something

happened. Otherwise why would you come here? Why would this DVD be here instead of being in Vasu's hands?' Daya was trying to push every drop he shed back into his eyes. He tried to stop shedding more, so that he can see the plant clearly again. That was his aim. To be able to trace the minute lines that run on the sides of the peepul leaves. This, then, meant stopping himself from crying.

When Murthy said that something must have happened at the airport, Daya, who was desperately trying to vanquish the small changes of heart that were slowly creeping into him, said, 'Nothing happened at the airport, Murthy; stop imagining things.' Murthy, who understood every denial as a point added to his argument, pushed further. 'If nothing happened at the airport, then why did the jeep, which was supposed to go straight to Vasu's house, come here?', he asked, perching his gaze firmly at the vulnerable Daya.

Daya didn't answer. He was still busy denying his tears any chance of making their way into the world. Murthy continued, 'If nothing really happened, why did the DVD come here, instead of landing into his hands?' Daya's silence boosted the credibility of Murthy's arguments as he kept piling up questions. 'If nothing really happened, why are you not picking up the calls of your partner-in-crime, Waltair Vasu? Sir, something intriguing is happening. You look different to me.'

Daya who had by now won the small tussle with his tears, said, 'Nothing has changed. Everything is the same.'

'No, sir. You are lying. I see something new. I am seeing a new Daya. You have changed!' He repeated this three times, You have changed, with increasing drama. It was starting to have its effect on Daya. He would have refused to listen to any voice telling him this, apart from Murthy's.

'I have not changed, Murthy!', he screamed, more to himself. 'I am the same old

guy. I have not changed. I am the same loafer. I am the same old rogue who would do anything for the sake of money, the same guy who has no qualms in committing atrocities for the sake of pleasure. I am the same old Daya, without any compassion. You will not find a trace of compassion in me, except in my name. Get it? Now stop haranguing me!', he told Murthy, sounding absolutely convinced of what he was saying.

Murthy, who was more than convinced that Daya had become a completely transformed man, refused to give up. 'Sir, you are lying. You have changed.'

'Did I not tell you I haven't changed?'

Who are you to say whether you have changed or not? Who is looking at you right now? You or I?', asked Murthy, confident of what he had observed in Daya over the past few months. Daya couldn't accept the fact that he could ever change. He had always felt proud about how independent he was of external circumstances, and how they could not affect him.

When Murthy kept adding salt to the wound, he got up from the bench, took his gun out, pointed it at Murthy and said, 'Mr Murthy, if you don't stop now, I will shoot you!' The whole station, with all the walls, files, tables, chairs and constables, stood still, listening to an infuriated Daya. Murthy looked happy, not frightened. He started smiling the minute Daya stopped talking. Daya was further irritated by Murthy's lack of fear. 'Don't wind me up, Mr Murthy. I haven't shot you down yet because you have family and children. Otherwise, you would be dead by now.'

Murthy smiled again and said, 'What did you just say? Mister Murthy? All of a sudden you took my age into account, after so many months, sir?' Daya realized. He was surprised at what he had just said. He let go of Murthy's collar that he

had been holding all this time, and brought his gun down. He looked fully surprised and clueless about how things were turning out.

‘Also, when did the families of other people start mattering so much to you, sir? This is what is called change, sir. You have changed, sir. You have changed.’ Murthy’s voice choked as he said that. He sat down on the floor next to Daya, wiping his tears away.

‘I don’t know how much you struggled to come out of your mother’s womb, but I know you are going through an immense struggle to come out of yourself. This second birth is paining you, sir.’, said Murthy, emphasizing all the keywords like an ardent student with a highlighter.

While he was trying to convince Daya that he had indeed changed, two black Tata Sumos carrying around fifteen men screeched to a halt in front of the station. The driver of one of the cars stepped out with a smile on his face. The other men looked as if they had forgotten to shave for years and were dressed like school children in a fancy-dress competition as rugged rowdies. One couldn’t blame them, for they were never scary enough for the public unless they looked that way. They were experienced hitmen who had served half their lives under Waltair Vasu. The mere thought of these men sent chills down the spines of many men and women in Vizag. As they walked into the station like a pack of wolves, angry at Daya for not being as faithful as they were to their master, Murthy said, ‘There is no point in debating. I say that you have changed. You deny it. These men will decide who is correct. If these rascals go out with the DVD, you are right; but if they leave empty-handed then I am right.’, he said, getting up from the ground.

Daya became angry, looking at those men who looked like pathetic creatures. He was ready to be done with them. ‘I will stay here and watch, sir.’, said Murthy as he walked to the other end of the station. He sat down there comfortably, looking at Daya. ‘I will watch from here, sir!’, he shouted.

The group of men walked into the station with their well-built bodies and hard soles making a distinct sound each time they thumped the floor. Daya imagined how intimidating these guys must have been to Deepti, who was mercilessly raped and killed. If the entire police station with guns and armoured vehicles seemed vulnerable with the entry of these loafers, he could imagine how hard it must have been for Deepti to even think of these guys at the factory every hour.

He raged at what brutes like these could do to women. He looked among them for the brothers. They were clearly not present, it was just the others trained under the same shelter and master. Daya lost all the patience and tolerance he was exhibiting for the sake of money and a luxurious life. He stood there holding the bench tightly in anger.

One among the gang said, 'Hey! What is your problem? Why are you not picking up our brother's calls? He says you were supposed to give him a DVD and now you aren't picking his calls. What is all this?'

'DVD, sir? There is a DVD on the bench. Do you see it? Go ahead and take it right away. It is rightfully yours.'

One of the rowdies walked to the bench like it was a couch in his house. Daya kept staring at him. He paid no heed. The rowdy tried to put his hands on the DVD. Daya in a quick move smashed his jawbones with a sharp, strong punch. Daya heard a foot hit the ground crisply to his left. He quickly turned to his left to find out the origin of the sound, and to his surprise, Murthy had moved from his spot. As Daya and the constables in the room stood surprised, looking at Murthy saluting Daya, another rowdy ran to take the DVD. Daya quickly moved two steps and planted a hard kick on his chest with his strong Woodland shoes. He went rolling to the table close by, the legs of the table prevented him from rolling further away. The inkpot and the paperweight fell on the man. Murthy's

eyes gleamed to see Daya going after them.

He beat up two more guys and turned to Murthy. 'Isn't this how you wanted to see me? Then why did you stop saluting me? Salute me, sir! Now!', said Daya to Murthy. Murthy stamped his leg to the ground and brought his right hand neatly to his forehead, saluting Daya in front of all the men. 'You have to keep hitting, I will keep on saluting!', said Murthy. 'Now, hit!', he added. Daya immobilized them one by one, as Murthy proudly stood and saluted every single time Daya's limbs broke theirs.

One of them almost took the DVD and ran away. Daya moved to the threshold of the station, caught him there, and thrashed his head right against it. He sat there, with his body like Narasimha after he killed Hiranyakashipu. Murthy with the other constables saluted Daya. 'Daya, the new SI!', said Murthy, as Daya walked in with the DVD triumphantly.

Murthy took the bodies of the beaten-up men in his police jeep and went straight to Waltair Vasu's guest house. With the bodies on the back side of the jeep, Murthy took a sharp u-turn in front of Vasu who was sitting outside, wondering why his men still hadn't called him.

The U-turn pushed the bodies of his men out of the jeep. They fell together as a heap in front of Vasu, like logs freshly cut off from a fallen tree. 'The new SI has taken charge. Daya! Daya, without any compassion.', said Murthy looking at Vasu. He had waited decades to throw Vasu's men, to see them beaten up like that in front of him, and to tell Vasu that he couldn't go on forever with his ways. 'All these days you have seen the son of corruption, but our Mother Law also has given birth to a child. His name is Daya. He has taken his charge just today. Hereafter, even god cannot save you and your men from him. He will smash your faces and break your bones.', cried a triumphant Murthy as he sped away in his car dramatically.

‘Hey! What are you talking about?’, said Vasu. By then, Murthy had already crossed the gate and Vasu’s words, like his men, vanished into thin air without any purpose. Vasu turned to the minister who was sitting and sipping his whiskey, and said, ‘Sir, he was in touch with me until an hour ago. He asked me to book two business class flights to the US and said after that he would bring the DVD straight to my house. Now look at what he has done. He doesn’t pick up my calls despite me calling him so many times, doesn’t come to my house with the DVD after the mother and daughter are off to the US, and to top all this, beats my men up when they go to the station to enquire about why he isn’t responding.’

The minister coolly put the glass of whiskey on the table and with a sigh said, ‘Did he not explain it clearly? Isn’t it the son’s duty to be around the mother when she is giving birth? And to also be responsible enough to take care of the court cases if she has gotten into some legal troubles?’

Vasu was puzzled at the minister’s ability to comprehend so quickly. He added, ‘All this time you have been talking about a DVD and how he isn’t bringing it to you. If it was that important, why did you give it to him in the first place?’ Vasu, who was already enraged with what Daya was doing, became enraged at the minister as well. He took a couple of steps away from the minister and slapped one of his men standing close by. ‘Who gave him the minister’s post?’, he shouted. ‘What?’, asked the minister. ‘Do you not understand what is happening? He is not our man anymore. He has changed. Why are you so dumb?’, asked Vasu, taking the liberty to be harsh to the minister with whom he had been so close. The minister, offended by Vasu’s jibes, said, ‘It was you who asked for a someone worse than you. And I got him transferred here, with great difficulty. Now, how can you give up half way?’

Vasu realized there was no point in talking to the minister. So he turned to his brothers and said, ‘Hey! All of you go underground immediately. None of you should be spotted outside.’ The eldest of the brothers said, ‘But why! What can

he do?’ Vasu lost his temper and slapped him hard. He took the belt lying there on the sofa and started hitting his brothers who were standing there. ‘Do you guys realize what you have done? If you rape someone, you should simply rape and get it done with. If you murder someone, you should murder and dispose off the body. But you guys will shoot yourself doing all these things, like you are heroes acting in a big movie. And with these DVDs, you will get me in trouble.’ He slapped the brothers hard and pushed them away saying they should not come out until he had asked them to.

Daya was in his office, along with his constables. He played the DVD that Lakshmi had given him before leaving to the US. The CD had five hours of torture shot over many days when Deepti was kept in the factory and humiliated by the brothers. The brothers had tied her hands while they took turns to bite her clothes off. As they bit the dress off, she kept moving in refusal. The men didn’t mind any of her resistance and went ahead to tear her clothes. As they were biting, occasionally her flesh got caught in their teeth along with her dress. They bit that too, making her bleed profusely. By the time she was stripped off, she already had clearly visible wounds on her shoulders, breasts, navel and thighs. Clothes lay on the floor with her thick maroon blood.

They later tied her up to an old cot and forced her to drink liquor. Later they all sat nearby drinking heavily. The brothers then took turns to rape her. She begged them and pleaded, but to no avail. The more she shouted, the more pleasure they got. They tortured her more and made sure they left the mouth open so that she could shout. They didn’t gag her mouth with any old cloth, because the screams gave them the pleasure of conquest.

This was just a sample of forty days of continuous raping and forced drinking, along with other kinds of torture. They got acid from a nearby shop and poured it in small quantities all over her body: forehead, cheeks, neck, back, belly, breasts, thighs, and feet. They chained her up later and poured boiling water all over her. They sat down, thinking of ways that would get her to scream more. Later, they put the DVD in a lorry inside the factory, and slept before they would burn her

alive.

Daya was enraged beyond control. He kicked the table hard. The glass of water on the table fell to the ground with a thud, just how Deepti had fallen when she was burnt down. Daya clenched his fist not knowing how to control his anger and resolved that he would get Vasu's brothers imprisoned. Before that, he would thrash them almost to death, he thought.

The screams of Deepti kept reverberating in his ears all through the day. To think that he had been indirectly involved in this despicable act made him feel ill. 'But aren't you used to all these things?', asked the old man to Daya. To him it seemed as if he was making things up, while actually not feeling sad about the incident.

'I have always kept myself away from rapes, murders, kidnaps, and other life-threatening crimes. The ones I commit are for money and power. I have been careful not to get into these things. I have considered them, but I think I have enough humanity left in me to not directly destroy people's dreams or not giving them a chance to rebuild their broken dreams. So this was a real blow to me. It wasn't even a murder. It was inexplicable torture, brutal rape, and then murder. I can't be a part of it. If I didn't make an effort to try undoing what I did, I wouldn't eat or sleep properly. My life would become miserable.'

'Then, what did you do to undo it?', asked the old man.

Chapter 11

‘I made a conscious decision to bring these monsters to justice. I could be involved and could tolerate fellow corrupt human beings but some crimes were unacceptable, whether or not I was involved. So, I took up the case seriously, temporarily putting aside all the other trivial cases. I got the additional commissioner to give me special permission to conduct raids in suspicious places. After much arm-twisting, I succeeded in persuading my higher officials to send the photos of these men to the other stations in the state, and most importantly, to the police check-posts. Since this case was very serious and there was proper evidence pertaining to who committed the crime, I was also able to convince them to stop all the vehicles that left the city to be checked. This way, it became easier to arrest them, because they couldn’t leave the state.’

‘Vasu, on the other hand, was doing all that he could to cancel the permissions given to me. But by then, the media had taken interest in the case, giving it detailed reporting on a daily basis. This pressure made it difficult for my higher officials to cancel my new authority.’ Daya told all this to the old man, also reminding himself that he had gone out of his way to catch the criminals that time, and that could atone for his indirect involvement in the murder.

‘Anna, we are not able to leave the city. All the police have begun stopping the vehicles and checking them thoroughly. What do we do now?’, asked one of Vasu’s brothers over the phone to an already tense Vasu. ‘Don’t come out. Don’t come out until I ask you to. There is no work for you here. Stay where you are. Do you understand? Don’t try acting too smart; this guy is one of us. He knows how criminals think and work because he himself is one. Some random girl asks him to do something and he gets possessed. These kids are growing up watching movies, stupid versions of movies, I tell you! Anyway, you guys are eating well, right? I transferred another 70,000 to your bank account. Even for the ATM, you guys don’t go out. Our boys are there, right? Send them out to get whatever you want. Be careful and keep changing your spots once every three days. Don’t reveal anything about your location on the phone. You never know, this stupid

guy could have started tapping our calls already.'

'Okay, Anna. We will take care. You take care too and quickly do your best to set things right,' he said and put the phone receiver down, leaning on the sides of the old boat.

As Daya was spending sleepless nights looking for those guys all over the city, he happened to be on the road where Venkat Rao's house was located. He was close to the house and saw Venkat Rao walking past that house. Venkat Rao's house had now become Vasu's house, and his men were sitting right in the middle of the garden and drinking. Rao put down the bag of vegetables that he had just bought from the market and stopped to look at his old house. Many decades of diligence, all for nothing! The sacrifices he had made to build that house came back to haunt him. How futile all of that had been.

Daya asked Murthy to stop the car. They were a few metres away from the house, and Rao didn't notice them. Daya took out his phone, dialled Rao's number and spoke. 'Venkat, sir. I heard that you have a good mangrove in the city. My friend told me about you and that you have taken good care of the land. He also told me you are not ready to sell it currently, because you are saving it for your granddaughter. But added that you might consider it if a good price were offered. What do you say?'

Venkat Rao laughed nervously at how things had changed and said, 'It is indeed true. But I lost my land to a couple of wolves in the city.'

'Oh, really? I'm really sorry to hear that, sir. Who were these men, sir?' asked Daya as if he didn't know. 'I had only heard of rowdies grabbing land but this time, a police officer went out of his way to get the land transferred to Vasu's name.'

‘Didn’t you get angry?’

‘Angry? I wanted to slap him and ask him if this is what his parents had taught him.’ Rao’s voice trembled in emotion.

‘I never had parents, sir.’, said Daya, giving up the pretence.

Daya disconnected the call and got out of the jeep. He walked fast towards Rao and said, ‘I don’t have parents, sir. I am an orphan. I was born to the air and grew up feeding on air. I had nobody to tell me what was right and what was wrong. I believed whatever I saw with my eyes was the truth. I had no mother to feed me also, sir. My stomach used to eat itself up and I would writhe in pain. I only thought of how I would survive in this world, never thought of how I should live. I don’t even know how I have lived this far! Since the world didn’t provide, I didn’t feel the need to provide to the world. If the world was not ready to feed a hungry child, I learnt how to feed on the world. I committed a mistake, sir.’

‘On the phone you said you wanted to slap me, right? Do it now.’ Venkat Rao stood still, not knowing how to respond. ‘Beat me, sir! If you beat me, I will go and beat them.’, said Daya, pointing to Vasu’s men who were oblivious to this entire conversation happening right outside the gate.

‘Beat me, sir. Beat me. When the son commits a big crime a father never stands still. He thrashes him up.’ Daya’s voice almost choked. ‘Slap me, father. Slap me!’, he shouted. Venkat Rao with all his rage and might slapped Daya hard on his right cheek. Daya moved two steps to his right. He didn’t experience the pain. Instead, Venkat Rao began to cry after slapping Daya. Daya’s eyes welled

up with tears, and could see a father in Rao. How much he had longed for a father who would tell him things about the world, take him to new places, teach him new things. He stayed there for a couple of seconds, looking at Venkat Rao's face, and felt as if he was meeting his long lost father after some twenty years.

He resisted his urge to embrace Rao tightly and cry over his shoulders. He moved away from him and walked towards the gate, his raging eyes fixed on Vasu's men. He kicked open the gate, much to the displeasure of Vasu's men, who seemed to think they were unchallengeable. As Daya came close to them, one of the guys got up to slap Daya. Daya held his hand, twisted it around and pushed him to the floor. He took his illegally acquired gun out of his sock and shot the liquor bottles these men had left on the table. He kicked one of the guys off his chair and pointed the gun to the head of the only one sitting at the table. Trembling with fear, he looked at Daya. Daya looked into his eyes and said, 'By tomorrow morning, the land should be back in his name. If Venkat Rao doesn't get his papers back tomorrow, there will be a bomb under Vasu's chair early tomorrow morning. Go tell him that.' Without waiting for a response he walked out of the gate and sped away in his car. Venkat Rao watched him leave, with a look of affection.

As he was driving, he was wondering about how much he had changed in the past few days. He took out his phone and called Sanvi. When she picked up the call, he said, 'Sanvi, I need to talk to you. I need to tell you few things. Are you free now? Can we meet?'

'What is it about? Daya, tell me.'

'I will tell you in person Sanvi. I'm coming near your house. I will wait at the street corner. Please come quickly.'

It is typical of the human mind to have a liking to mull over the most unfortunate of things. Sanvi thought about many different possibilities as she quickly changed from her pyjamas to her t-shirt and a pair of jeans, and walked towards the car. Daya smiled at Sanvi as she opened the door and sat inside. 'Tell me Daya, what is it?', asked an impatient Sanvi. 'Wait, wait. I will tell you. Where will I go without telling you?' said Daya as he smiled at her nervousness.

'I am not a good person, Sanvi. I have been cheating all through my life and I have lied to you as well. I have cheated you on many occasions,' said Daya. Tears ran uncontrollably from Sanvi's eyes. It was more out of anger and frustration than out of sorrow. 'But now I am a completely new human being. I have changed, and that is because of you. This is what I am now.', said Daya. He remained quiet for the next few minutes. Sanvi, who cried profusely, stopped after a while and looked at Daya. He was looking away into the street with his eyes filled with tears ready to roll down like wax from a lit candle. Even though she was angry with him for hiding the truth, she couldn't resist to admire the honesty that he possessed then. She also couldn't see him morose anymore, and in any case it was too late to imagine a life without him. They had grown into each other, thought, and felt together like a single entity.

'Firstly, who asked you to tell me the truth? You should have told me all this in the beginning, or at least within one month of our acquaintance. You didn't tell me when you had to and now that there is no need, you come and tell me. Now I am confused.', said Sanvi. Daya who didn't know what was running through her mind, asked her straight away, 'Will you stay with me or not?'

'I should leave you now. I shouldn't even forgive you. But since you are telling me that the main reason for your change of attitude was me, I will hear you out. I pardon you.' She turned her head to the left sharply, to look out through the window. The perfection to which she could feign the tone of a haughty person forgiving an assumed subservient made Daya chuckle. He turned to her and their eyes met. An embrace and exchange of breaths was a natural consequence of this sweet reconciliation.

As she got down from the car and walked home, Daya got a call from the police station. A dead body in a rotten state had been found in Vizag beach. He was asked to quickly reach the spot for further investigation. Daya was perplexed at the number of murders happening in the city. As he drove to the spot, he was thinking of how he would handle so many cases. Solving one murder case in that city was already such a difficult task, given that the criminals knew forensics better than the investigators themselves. He was thinking if he could hand over the new case to a specially appointed inspector until he finished the rape and murder case of Deepti. He was lead to the scene by two constables who rushed to there from the station. The body was in a highly decomposed condition, and no one could identify the body. It was that of a woman's and the body was sent for post mortem and inspection in an ambulance. Daya went to his higher officials to brief them about the new case. There he also told them that he was fully occupied by the case of Deepti, and if they needed the case to be solved at the earliest, someone else had to take control.

Two days later, Daya got a phone call informing him that this woman had been raped before she was murdered. Several burn marks had been identified on her body along with cuts, mostly from a blade or a knife, and whip marks, which seemed to be from a belt. This sent chills down Daya's spine. He asked them if they could perform a DNA test and what they would need to do that. He was told that anything that would help them match the DNA would be helpful, and that even a strand of hair would be enough. He quickly called Lakshmi and asked her if they still had Deepti's comb that had not been cleaned in a long time. She brought the comb to the police station. Daya took it to the hospital and handed it over to the doctors. They asked them to inform him about the results quickly.

A few days later, he received a call, confirming that the DNA matched. It was Deepti's body, and it wasn't a new case that he would have to handle, but the same case that he was desperately trying to solve. The video and the post-mortem report that confirmed her identity and listed out things done to her were enough to imprison Vasu's brothers.

As Daya was coming out of the police headquarters where he had gone to update his higher officials about this very crucial case, the media personnel quickly surrounded him and asked for updates. Vasu had been glued to the television set for three days now. He was constantly changing between all news channels to check for updates about this case. His eyes had become puffy with lack of sleep. He drank profusely sitting in front of the TV and wouldn't listen to anybody's plea to leave the hall for a even to eat or take a shower. Now that Daya flashed in the TV screen, he got agitated and threw the whisky bottle at the screen. He was losing his mind out of the rage he had for Daya, whom he had brought to Vizag himself. He gave him a bungalow, money, and all the political power needed to live a happy and corrupt life. And to think that in return he framed his dear brothers! He wanted to cut Daya into pieces and feed him to the dogs and vultures. One of his men close by grabbed the whisky bottle, just in time to save both the bottle and the TV from breaking.

‘Sir, do you have any idea who was behind this crime?’, asked a young journalist after having pushed her way through the deluge of other TV journalists, who were jutting their microphones and cameras on Daya's face. For them it was a daily routine. Daya responded, ‘They are the brothers of the infamous goon of Vizag, Waltair Vasu. Ravi, Vamsi, Sandeep, and Mani. I have proof of their involvement and will produce it in the court once they are caught. Their photos will be sent by mail and fax to all media outlets. A bounty of five lakhs would be provided to anyone who would give valuable information about the whereabouts of the accused. I request that the public and media personnel to cooperate with us in finding these criminals.’ He walked straight into the car after answering all the questions.

Vasu used all the contacts that he had to save his brothers. Vasu, over several decades, had built a very strong network with many politicians. He needed them; they needed him. But after Daya had announced the names of the rapists and identified them as Vasu's brothers, there were protests all over the state. Men and women from different religious and economic backgrounds poured into the streets to demand justice for Deepti. It was too late for the police or the

politicians to do anything against Daya. People took to the streets surrounding Vasu's home, and were standing outside his gates demanding that he immediately surrender his brothers to the police. They threatened him, saying that they would break his windows if he failed to come out and promise them to hand over his brothers. Vasu, who was sitting in his living room listening to all this, was scared to leave the house and go out. This denial to comply with the people would force them to pelt stones at his windows to express their wrath. Vasu was watching all the news channels, the same things over and over again. One of the news channels showed the protestors in front of his own house. He was devastated to see the damage done to its exteriors. One middle-aged man broke Vasu's car window with a thick log. All the news channels were telecasting the protests around the city. If not for TRP, this case would have become one of the many cases of media blackout.

‘Oh, so that was about this rape case?’, asked the old man, as Daya was talking. ‘My son also went for these protests last week.’

‘Oh! What does he do?’

‘He is a fisherman.’, said the old man. ‘We have all been fishermen. We live and die by the sea, and seldom come into your busy, joyless city life. The sea breeze, the sand, the fish and the boats are where we find joy. Every day is an adventure. We never know if we would return home safely. Yet, if we do, then each day is a festival day. Just that we never have enough money. We can't send our kids to the English-medium school that your city kids go to. Yours attend the Saraswathi pooja, but the gates of your schools are closed forever to us. Even devi Saraswathi is privatized! We send our kids to the old municipal schools. You city dwellers don't want to share you wealth or joy. So much as a result of your education and your deceitful governments.’

The city-dweller Daya nodded in agreement, and looked towards the sea. He realized that this vastness meant so many different things for different people.

While for the middle class like him it meant leisure, for the marginalized it meant a livelihood.

‘Our woes need a thousand and one nights to be fully spoken about. Anyway, what will you do after listening to my story? Write a book or make a movie and show us as pitiable characters, who have no joy in their life and only pain? We never get to have power in your movies. We are powerless and need your magnanimity and charity to live a good life. Why do we never get to stand on our own feet in your movies?’, said the old man, expressing genuine anger. Daya looked at him with no answers. ‘We will do all this another day. Now tell me your story. A city dweller’s story.’, said the old man. Daya didn’t open his mouth. The old man nudged him and smiled as he took out a paan packet from the shorts under his lungi.

‘Last week, a fisherman called me.’, said Daya. The old man then smirked a bit, and then listened to him intently. ‘He said he knew the whereabouts of Vasu’s brothers. They were a few kilometres into the sea, from the Vizag beach. They were on a ship, and he identified them while he went fishing. He seemed to have a good memory. He remembered the faces that flashed on the TV screen and matched them with what he saw in real life.’

‘Nothing like that. It’s the five lakhs bounty that made him remember it.’, said the old man, almost out of jealousy. Daya chuckled and continued. ‘Then we took some helicopters and went over the sea to arrest them. They had guns and tried shooting at us from the ship. We were able to get down onto the ship quickly and arrest them after a quick exchange of bullets.’

The evening papers that day carried news of the arrest of Vasu’s four brothers. The TV channels kept telecasting this news on a loop for a very long time. The fact that Vasu had threatened the editors of news channels in the past whenever they covered something about him, made the channels and papers loathe him. Now that they had a chance to avenge themselves, they attacked him like never

before.

Vasu called the minister and said, 'Sir! He has arrested my brothers. He has ruined their lives. Our peace of mind is gone. Take away his job right now!', he cried in anger. 'It's too late Vasu. There is enormous media coverage and the people are on the streets. We can't mess with anything. Even god cannot stand in front of the power that these protestors are exhibiting. I am already at the government office. Now if I try doing something and get caught in the process, I will be removed and lose my position. Please don't call me again.', said the minister before disconnecting the call.

Chapter 12

‘I called Lakshmi that evening to pass on the good news, but she wasn’t picking up my calls. After trying for about three hours, she finally picked up.’, said Daya to the old man. ‘The minute she picked up the call I asked her why she took so long. She said that her mother had to be admitted to a hospital urgently as she had been watching all the news channels giving all the news about Deepti and fainted on seeing her dead body in the news. She is in a trauma.

The old man sighed and said, ‘Yes. I don’t understand how those people can broadcast all this. Do they never stop to think about how the girls family would feel, and how it would affect them socially? Imagine something similar being shown to the world about your own daughter. So insensitive.’

Lakshmi’s mother had a heart attack after she watched the news. She was admitted to the hospital in a very critical condition. ‘Is your mother in a condition to talk over the phone?’, asked Daya. ‘No. She is in shock and can’t speak.’, said Lakshmi. ‘Put the phone to her ear. She can hear me talk.’

‘I’m putting the phone to her ear now.’

‘Mother! I am here, I am here.’, assured Daya.

The next day the criminals were produced in the court. Knowing that Deepti’s case was coming up, various groups had gathered outside the court and were shouting slogans. They were asking for the worst possible punishment for the four accused. A few of them wanted a hanging, while others disputed that

nobody had the right to take away another human life.

But both groups agreed that the rapists had to be punished. There was a very small group which believed that severe punishments would only aggravate the situation, and that rehabilitation was the best way out. The case was in the court and there was a unusual amount of media attention surrounding the protests. This in turn sent more protestors to the protest site, leading to a huge crowd.

Inside the courtroom, the seats were full, and people were standing along the sides too. That put additional pressure on the judge. On one side, all four of Vasu's brothers were made to stand with their hands cuffed in front of them. They had two armed constables on either side of them. Vasu had hired one of the best lawyers in the country, who stood alongside the four brothers, while Daya stood by with Murthy opposite the four brothers. Murthy admired Daya from the moment he had changed. From a guy who let these four guys out of the jail on his very first day in Vizag, to having them all arrested and producing them in court, earnestly trying to get them the punishment they deserved.

'Good morning, your honour. Shall I proceed?', asked Babu, the lawyer for the prosecution. 'Yes, proceed.'

'Your honour, the four men standing here have brutally killed and raped a girl called Deepti. The body found on the beach showed signs that she had been brutally tortured before her death. In addition, these animals had recorded the rape. Deepti managed to contact her sister and give her the footage. There have been several murder attempts on Lakshmi to retrieve the DVD. Lakshmi is in the US now, and entrusted Daya with the DVD when she left India. On the DVD footage, we can clearly see these men and their atrocities. The case has become one of national importance, and the whole nation has been on the streets demanding justice for Deepti. We all expect that your verdict will be the death sentence for these four men. That's all, your honour.'

‘Produce your evidence.’, the judge pronounced. An officer passed the DVD that Daya had entrusted him with. The judge’s assistant start playing it in the courtroom. All the men in the court, and the criminals, were silent, for this video would close the case once and for all. The screen was black and nothing appeared on the TV. The judge, the lawyer, and the criminals turned to look at Daya, who was completely puzzled. The criminals were smirking at Daya, for they knew then that Daya couldn’t do anything to them. ‘What is this evidence? What you gave as proof is not playing. It is empty; there is no data. Is this what you call your proof?’, said the judge, wondering how long this case would drag on for. ‘When we gave the DVD it had the proof, your honour. It seems like somewhere in between, some kind of manipulation has taken place.’ said Babu.

Suresh, the defence lawyer, grabbed this opportunity. ‘I’m sorry, sir. The court doesn’t want to hear about your ifs and buts. It needs proof. Not only have you shamed the court by placing an empty DVD as a proof, but also wasted its precious time.’, he said. Daya stood there, weak in his heart for he had been so confident about getting justice for Deepti. He was thinking of having to answer Lakshmi, who he had sent away to the US with her mother, saying he would be there to take care of the case, and that they should trust him. What would he tell Sanvi? How will he calm his own conscience?

‘My clients have been falsely accused in a dangerous case. As a result, they have been undergoing enormous trauma. Already the issue has gained national significance, and the people assuming that these men are truly guilty have been protesting against them. So, in the absence of concrete proof against my clients, I request your honour to declare my clients innocent and release them immediately,’ said Suresh.

One of the girls from the crowd looked at Daya and shouted, ‘Did you sell the DVD? How many lakhs did you get for this?’

‘Order, order!’, called out the judge lest the already emotional crowd got too agitated. The judge spent two minutes writing something down. He then started reading it out: ‘Due to lack of any concrete evidence against the four accused, I declare them...’

‘Sir, I have proof.’, interrupted Daya. Everyone in the court turned sharply and looked at Daya. ‘I have proof, sir.’, he said again, now that he had everyone’s attention. The judge, looking surprised, asked him, ‘What proof is there?’

‘You give me one days’ time, sir. I will get you the proof.’

‘You don’t seem to understand how the court works. If we get time and don’t produce the proof, all of us will get into deep trouble.’

‘Sir, trust me. Allow one days’ time. I will get the proof.’, begged Daya. The lawyer looked at Vasu and then turned to the judge reluctantly, saying, ‘Your honour, we have the evidence. I request you to give me one days’ time to produce it.’ The opposition lawyer, Suresh, said, ‘I object, your honour. First they said the DVD had been manipulated; now they are saying something else. Like I said, the issue has been fabricated, and my innocent clients are suffering. They have already faced a lot of damage. We are in fact mulling over the possibility of filing a defamation suit. It is not good to extend this case, your honour.’

The judge considered the whole situation intensely, while the people, the four accused, Daya, the lawyers, Murthy, Sanvi and Vasu silently waited for words that would favour them. ‘One day extension granted,’ said the judge. The accused expressed dejection while Vasu, who had earlier thought that the case was on his side and had felt invincible, was now shattered. ‘The court is adjourned.’, said the judge before leaving the building.

That night in his bar, Vasu talked to his lawyer, Suresh. 'What does he have with him!', he shouted. Another person entered the bar. It was Babu. 'Come, come, come. What proof does he have? Did he tell you?', asked Vasu. 'I tried my best, brother, but he is not saying anything. There should be something significant. Otherwise he wouldn't be this confident.', said Babu. While Vasu was drinking with the lawyer who had sold himself to Vasu for seventy lakhs, Daya was sitting with Sanvi on the Vizag beach, where they had met for the first time.

'Ah, this same beach where we are sitting now?', asked the old man in an inexplicable excitement. 'It happened not only on the same beach, but this same day.', said Daya. 'So you were here on this beach a couple of hours ago with your lover?', said the old man as he chuckled. Daya smiled at how the old man still hadn't lost his boyish naughtiness, and had managed not to get bored of life. 'Yes, I was.'

'Then why are you bleeding? Did she beat you up?'

'No. That happened after she left.'

'Oh, fine. Then tell me what happened. Isn't today the last night you have to get your proof ready?'

'Yes.'

'How did that proof become invalid then?'

‘Sanvi asked the same question.’

Daya had called Sanvi and asked her to come to the beach that evening. As soon as she came there, she ran to Daya and hugged him. ‘What happened to the proof, Daya?’, she asked with sadness and dejection in her voice. ‘What else Sanvi? Money! The lawyer whom we thought was on our side must have taken money from Vasu and sold the DVD off himself. If I were my old corrupted self I would have made a hundred copies of the video by now, because I didn’t trust anybody. I assumed everyone was as dishonest as me. But now that I have changed, I trusted the lawyer completely, and the possibility of his corruption didn’t even strike me. When you are honest, the world doesn’t automatically follow. Honesty is not naïvely trust in others: one must also shield oneself from the worlds dishonesty.’

‘Shall I tell you the truth?’, asked Daya rhetorically. ‘I don’t have any proof with me.’

‘Then what will you do tomorrow?’

‘I don’t know Sanvi. I don’t know!’ After silently sitting and looking at the sea, he said ‘Sanvi, it’s getting late. You go home.’

‘But what will you do Daya?’

‘I’m better now. I want to spend a little more time here by the sea. You go home safely and leave me a text before you go to bed.’

He went to his jeep and brought out a bottle of whiskey. Sitting on the edge of a boat, he drank without thinking of anything in particular. After forty-five minutes, his phone started buzzing. He took the call, hoping it would be Sanvi. 'Hello. Have you reached home safe?'

'You won't reach home safely, you disloyal dog.' It was Vasu's voice.

'Whatever happens you will never change, will you?', said Daya. Vasu started weeping. He was sitting against the wall in his bar. He had a bottle of rum in his hand. 'Didn't you say, "East or west, friendship is the best?" What happened to all that? Do you realize what you have done to my brothers lives?'

'Do you realize what your brothers have done to Deepti's life?'

'Hey! Traitor. Don't talk about useless things. What do you have with you? Bring me the proof. Come, come to me. I will give you whatever you want.'

'I will meet you in the court tomorrow.'

'Hey!', screamed Vasu. 'They are my brothers. They are my family. We are all born to the same mother. Do you know how it feels to have your family torn apart? You bloody rascal! It is pain. Torture. How would you know about that, you useless orphan?'

'Who? Who is the orphan?', Daya shouted back. 'Venkat Rao, from whom you

tried grabbing the land, is my father. Lakshmi, who you tried to kill, is my sister. Deepti, who your brothers raped brutally, was also my sister. Their mother is now my mother too. I have a family too. Your brothers have raped and murdered my sister. You have tried killing my other sister. I will not leave you. I will not spare even one of your brothers tomorrow!', explained Daya, also to himself, feeling sort of relieved at finally having a family.

'Where are you now? Tell me that.', said Vasu.

'Me? I don't know where exactly, but somewhere on the Vizag beach. Somewhere on this belt if you come, you can find me. I know you won't come. You coward will send your men. Whoever is coming, send them along with two bottles of whiskey. Understood?'

'Whiskey?'

'Yeah. I just finished a bottle and now I am sitting here without alcohol. If you assure me that you will send whiskey, I will stay here. I will wait till they come, otherwise I'm leaving right now.'

'Hey! Wait right there. I'm sending two bottles for you.' Vasu started thinking of a trap. 'Come, you idiot! I am sitting here all alone. Come.', said Daya, knowing exactly what Vasu was plotting.

As Daya sat on the beach, finishing the last drops of his booze, two cars zoomed onto the beach. Daya half-heartedly turned to check where the noise was coming from at that hour of the night. Daya recognized them immediately: they were Vasu's men. He had seen them at a number of parties that Vasu had invited him

to. As they came there looking for Daya, searching every boat on the beach, Daya got up and hollered, 'Here I am, you idiots!' He wanted them to come quickly so that he could carry on drinking whiskey. They all ran fast towards him, and surrounded him. 'I won't run away. Don't worry. I am the hero, right? Why will I run away? You useless goons, you should be the ones running away from me. Anyway, all that comes later. For now, where are the bottles of whiskey I was promised?' One of the men walked up close to him. 'You want bottles? Here, take this!', he said as he hit Daya hard on the chin. That triggered off a whole lot of thrashing from Daya who, being drunk, was finding it hard to hit anyone accurately. After a while he gained some stability and stood his ground. He smashed the empty bottle on one of the guys' heads. 'Where is the drink?', he asked them again. None of them answered. They were keen on finishing the job they were sent and paid for.

As he stood, looking desperately for the whiskey bottle, one of the men came from behind and hit his head with a wooden log. 'I'm waiting here for the whiskey! I trusted your Vasu. How dare you people come here empty-handed. And as if cheating me was not enough, you also want to kill me?' He kicked one of the men. This enraged them. With no set coordination, they all started hitting him as and where they could. Daya was totally exhausted, bleeding from different parts of his body.

He found himself surrounded by the men, who had formed a circle. They all came to attack him at once. Daya thought about the new family he had found. He realized that he hadn't done anything for his family until now, and keeping himself alive to win justice for Deepti would be the favour that he would do in their honour. Nobody could understand from where he found the strength, but he managed to beat them up with the log, which he swiped from one of the men hitting him. As he hit them, he was also injured in multiple places. But, eventually, the strength of affection proved stronger than the strength of money. Legal or illegal, ethical or unethical, any effort that's unaccompanied by impassionate indulgence, is doomed to prove itself futile.

‘So even that happened a while ago?’, asked the old man. ‘Yeah. After they left, I came and sat here by this anchor. All this blood that you see here on my head, hands, and what you can’t see on my legs, was a result of god knows how many blows. They came, fought me, and lost. Can you see them there?’, asked Daya as he pointed to the men lying there around him.

‘Are you still sure you don’t want to go to the hospital? It’s been over three hours since you started telling me your story. It’s almost dawn and you have the court case tomorrow.’

‘Yes. I’m okay. It is not a problem. I will go to a clinic on the way, get first aid and see what can be done for the case.’, said Daya. ‘So you don’t have the proof?’, asked the old man. ‘That’s right.’, said Daya as he got up and started walking away slowly. ‘I will watch the TV today and see what happens to the case. Don’t leave those rascals. My house is right here. Come to us for lunch when all this is done. My son will be very happy to meet you.’, said the old man as he started walking in the opposite direction towards his house. ‘Sure!’, said Daya as he turned to look at the old man once more. He smiled as he got into the jeep and drove away.

Daya managed to make it to the court the following morning. As he went to the court he still had a lot of blood on his hands and legs. Above his left eyebrow, the doctor had placed a plaster. As he got down from the jeep and walked towards the entrance of the court, he could see the enormous number of people who had gathered there. All the news channels had sent their journalists to the spot to cover the story live. One of the journalists there said, ‘The whole nation is waiting to hear the final decision. We are all eager to see the proof that Daya said he would produce.’ The cameraman shooting her turned his camera towards Daya to show to his viewers that Daya had entered the court premises.

As he was walking into the court, his eyes darted around, looking for Sanvi. He found her running to the front of the crowd that had now engulfed her. He

stopped, turned around and walked towards her. As they met, he held her hands and said, 'I want to tell you something. I think I am lucky to have had you come into my life. Even you don't know how much I have changed.' He hugged her. Tears trickled down Sanvi's cheeks as he continued to say, 'I love you,' and walked away from her.

'Hey Daya. Stop. Please stop!', pleaded Vasu. Daya looked around at the number of people who were there chanting 'We want justice!', and stopped by Vasu's side. 'Hey. Last night your men tried well. But it didn't work out well at all. You showed your true colours again. It's okay to be evil if you are being honest, but evil spirits and dishonesty make a horrible pair. Didn't you promise me you would send your men along with two whiskey bottles? What happened to the bottles?', enquired Daya. 'Anyway, what do you think? Think I have the proof or not?', he added. 'Don't ask me stupid questions,' said Vasu. 'Is this Kaun Banega Crorepathi?', Daya looked at him blankly. 'Now leave out all your pretensions and tell me whether you have it or not.', asked an impatient Vasu.

'If you have it, give it to me I will give you as much money as you want he quickly added.'

'Alright. Propose a figure that will make me happy!'

Ten...twenty...thirty crores? He kept counting up as Daya continually declined. '100?'

'No. I don't like the figure.' Daya walked away.

'Hey, that's thirty crores more than what I myself have!'

‘Ah! How much love for your brothers! Come, come. Let’s see what happens inside the court.’

As they entered the court, everyone took their positions. Daya stood there while the four brothers were brought along with their lawyer. Vasu didn’t sit down and was pacing frantically, hoping his brothers would somehow be released.

All the journalists were waiting outside for any news about the nature of the new proof that Daya was expected to submit. A few channels that wanted to carry news faster than the others had planted a couple of their people inside the court, to send the details out through SMS. Such was the importance of the case. The judge arrived.

Everyone stood up to greet him. He gestured at them asking them to be seated and reopened the case. He looked at Daya and said, ‘The one day that you had asked for has passed. Is the proof ready?’ The lawyer turned to his side, looked at Daya and asked, ‘Do you hear? Is the proof ready? Where is it?’ Daya, without responding to the lawyer, addressed the judge straight and said, ‘Your honour. I have the proof. It is ready!’

Chapter 13

‘Where is the proof?’, the judge asked Daya. Daya looked around as he thought of the video proving Deepti’s brutal rape. Her screams resounded in his brains as though they were still fresh, crisp. Vasu stood there with pleading eyes, squinting them a little and gesturing Daya to have some mercy on his brothers. Sanvi stood there in the first row among the hundreds that had gathered in the morning to witness one of the major cases of this generation. Murthy was also with them. Both the lawyers were waiting for the proof. The four brothers, though scared for their lives, stood there arrogantly. They were somehow confident about their brother’s power and affection for them. They hoped and believed that the case could be turned on its head the last moment. Looking at them, Daya realized if they were not punished then, not only the four of them would walk free and continue doing the same things, but it would also send a message across to the country that even deadly criminals can emerge victorious by beating the system.

‘I am the proof, your honour.’, said Daya. The court was confused by this. ‘I am the personal witness, your honour.’, said Daya. ‘Did you see them rape the girl? Did you with your own eyes witness the four of them sexually assault Deepti?’, asked the judge. ‘Not four, your honour.’ said Daya. The court was thrown into more confusion. ‘One more than that.’ Now who was this fifth person, they all wondered. One of the men there whispered to the people sitting around him, ‘When I was a kid, my father had told me that Vasu had five brothers. Later there was a rumour that one of them was killed in an encounter, but I think he is still alive.’

‘Who is the fifth person?’, asked the judge. ‘I am the fifth one, sir.’, said Daya as he wept. This was enough to shock Sanvi to death. She trusted him too much to believe what he was saying. Murthy on the other hand stood with his eyes wide open, looking aghast at Daya. Vasu and his brothers looked at each other in confusion.

The judge didn't know what Daya was getting at. The whole court broke into an instant chatter, as everyone tried to make sense of what was happening. The question that ran in everyone's minds was: why would Daya arrest these people if he himself was involved in the crime? He had the proof with him, but later when the proof was shown to have been manipulated by someone, he asked for more time to submit it. Now despite all this, why would he voluntarily agree to this confession? Only Sanvi, Murthy, and Vasu knew the tremendous ethical shift that he had undergone. They knew Daya as the same old, corrupt policeman who would make money and consolidate power in all possible ways.

Daya started talking, putting an end to the chatter. 'The five of us abducted the girl together.'

'Hey! Have you gone mad?', yelled one of the brothers.

'The five of us together raped her.', Daya continued, indifferent to Vasu's brothers. 'We tortured her ruthlessly. We pierced her skin with needles your honour. We cut her flesh with blades too. Not a day or two, forty days of hellish torture! She used to beg us to stop, sir. She would fall at all our feet and cry out loud, saying she couldn't take it anymore, and that we should show mercy. But every time she pleaded, we felt more powerful. We used to stand around her as she crawled herself to our feet, begging. I can't express how much ecstasy that gave us. It was addictive. We resolved that we should rape many more women in a similar way or, if fact, in worse ways. After Deepti, what if we didn't find another girl for the next forty days? That was when we decided to record this whole thing. We bought a video camera and started recording all the tortures and her screams. So, if we don't get another girl soon, we can watch this tape over and over again and revel in joy until we do. Then, we would repeat the same techniques and record them. We searched the internet to find the worst forms of torture. We realized we weren't alone. There seemed to be a lot of men who shared the same fantasies. A few like us seem to love torturing women. All of us then planned to record the rape and torture and create a database of our deeds.'

‘Sir, he is lying, don’t listen to him!’, screamed Vasu from the crowd. The four brothers were furious. ‘Order! Order!’, called out the judge. The crowd became silent again. Turning to Daya, he asked ‘If you were one of them, why did you file a case on these four men?’

‘Sir, you are very smart! You are asking me the right questions. You are making things easier for me to explain. I had the tape that we recorded. I decided to make money out of it. I blackmailed them. They didn’t budge. I told them the video that I have with me will be handed over to the court, and all of us will be inside the bars or might even get hanged to death. They didn’t seem bothered at all. It was Vasu’s political power that seemed to give them the courage to do these things. Apart from that, the state of our judicial system, wherein even a prime minister’s case can go on for decades, assured them that they wouldn’t be held guilty, however strong the proof might be. Then I spoke to this lawyer, and we hatched a plan.’, said Daya, pointing.

‘We decided to threaten Vasu’s brothers and get the money. But they still didn’t budge. So, I filed a case and we brought it to court. Despite all this, he still wouldn’t hand over any money. He bought this lawyer for a cheap price, and this idiot gave away the DVD. That DVD from yesterday was blank. The lawyer still thinks that I don’t know what happened to the DVD. I used to be a much worse criminal than him and I know how it works. I still thought I would give it one last try. So yesterday I asked you for one more day, hoping I could threaten them again, and somehow get a couple of crores. But Vasu...he sent men to beat me up and take the proof away. I told them I didn’t have any proof, and pleaded them to leave me. They didn’t listen to me and beat me up very badly. They hit me till I bled and fell on the floor unconscious. Can you see the wounds your honour?’, he said pointing to the wounds on his face and hands.

‘They left me there on the floor, thinking I would die. Only when I was that close to death did I realize how much of pain she would have gone through. At that moment, when I was about to die, I thought about the dreams and plans I had for my future and how I wanted to live a happy, exceptional, and fulfilling

life. It struck me that Deepti would have felt the same way. She might have been in love. She had a family. How many plans would she have made to live a beautiful life with them all? That was when I realized what we had done. At the brink of death, I decided that the only right thing to do would be to get us all into prison, or get us all killed. Until that happens, I can't have peace of mind.', said Daya. Sanvi and Murthy knew what Daya was doing. Murthy was stunned by Daya's courage. Sanvi, on the other hand couldn't stand Daya telling the world that he was a rapist. She didn't know what she would do without him, and cried uncontrollably.

'When I was so close to death, I was asking why God didn't take my life away. When I got up and found I was still alive, I wondered why I had been allowed to live at all. I realized that it was because the truth of the matter should be brought to the masses, the actual owners of this country, its resources and its diverse culture, and to this court which is like a temple to so many in this country and to you, the god of this temple. That is why I have turned an approver and I am confessing, your honour.

'Even as I was entering the court, Vasu tried to bribe me, sir. He offered me 100 crores if I would give him the proof. But I have decided, your honour. I don't want money anymore. I want the truth to be known! Sir, we have done great injustice to Deepti. Don't let us get out. If I die a natural death without being punished for this heinous crime, I will die an incomplete and unsatisfied death. Please punish us for what we have done. Otherwise the voice of this girl that I keep hearing in the night won't stop. Deepti is haunting me every single minute. Even when I am alone, when I am talking to people, when I am eating, driving, or sleeping. Please your honour, give us all quick punishment and help me sleep soundly.', he added.

The judge seemed to be still thinking about all this. This possible scepticism annoyed Daya, who decided to take things up another notch. Looking intently at the judge's face, Daya said, 'Your honour, since I trust you to give us the punishment we deserve and make me peaceful again, at this moment I want to

make another confession. I don't know if it is pertaining to the case, but it surely is relevant to us and to you. The plan initially was not to kidnap Deepti, but your daughter Sandhya. Don't you believe me? Sandhya, sir! Gitam's college, second year. She goes every day to Gajuwaka for tuition. In fact, the original trap was for your Sandhya. We had even fixed our minds. It was her that we wanted to kidnap. We had it well planned out.'

'When the driver comes to pick her up, he usually comes ten minutes before the college sessions get over. He sits at the tea stall opposite to the college, and drinks tea. There, one of our men would have started a fight with him, and dragged him to our car. There we would beat him up and take the car keys. When Sandhya came to sit in the car, it would be too late. We would start the car and flee.'

The judge looked at Deepti's picture and remembered his daughter. His anger against the four Vasu brothers and Daya grew. 'But on the day we had planned to kidnap her, she didn't come to college. So, I suggested to try again some other day. But Mani...this guy...', said Daya, pointing to one of Vasu's brothers, 'asked us if it mattered if we kidnaped Sandhya or Saraswathi. All that matters is that she is a woman, he argued. That was when we found Deepti. I said no. They didn't listen to me. But since Deepti was quite bountiful as well, I eventually agreed to their plans.'

'Sir! He is lying, sir. Don't listen to him!', shouted Vasu's brothers. Vasu couldn't stand to see them begging for their lives. He turned away for he could no longer see the plight of his helpless brothers. 'Your honour, I think it was a Thursday or Friday when we came again for Sandhya. She still wasn't there. We heard she had gone to Guntur, your brother's house. Isn't that true?', he asked the judge. The judge nodded his head in utter disgust. 'Weren't you scared that you were indulging in such a big crime?', asked the judge. 'What would you have done? Worst-case scenario, you would imprison us. If not this court, then some another court. There are hundreds of departments, hundreds of tricks. Sir, we are so powerful, we can rape any girl at will. But, do you have the power and

ability to punish us? I urge you to leave every other case sir, and take up this one. We plead guilty of raping her. Can you order to hang us to death as soon as possible?’

‘This has never happened in the history of the Indian legal system.’

‘Well, there are 52 criminals in this country who have been sentenced to death. If the justice system is slow, criminals like us we will live free for several decades. During this time, how many more Sandhyas and Deeptis will suffer, sir? We will lose count and even forget their names! This is exactly why I love this country, sir.’ Daya clapped his hands to make a distinct noise, accentuating the point he was making. ‘There is so much freedom in this country, your honour!’, he added, and then shouted out loud, ‘I love my country! I am proud to be an Indian.’

‘Sir, if I have the courage and capacity to tell you in front of everyone that we committed the crime and brutally raped an innocent girl, do you have the courage to hang us to death before tomorrow morning?’, he said, snapping his fingers towards the judge’s face, trying to provoke the judge to deliver a harsh the verdict ASAP.

When Daya realized he had no proof, he created an amazingly convincing story. Now that he had delivered his hypothesis with utmost conviction and enough provocation to trigger the judge into emotionally taking a hasty decision, Daya stood back and looked at Vasu and his brothers, smirking at them and their arrogance of power.

All four of Vasu’s brothers jumped and ran towards Daya, trying to attack him. They saw that their fates had been sealed; there was no escaping. This infuriated them and they lost their cool. The constables ran and stopped them before any harm was done. They dragged them back to their places as Daya continued to

smirk at their desperation and incompetence. The judge spent a good ten minutes writing on the papers on his desk.

Vasu, his brothers, Murthy and Sanvi, along with all the witnesses were anxiously waiting for the verdict. Daya, the arrogant man that he was, was convinced that they would be hanged to death, and only wanted to know how many days they had to live. He was fully prepared to die and not in the least bit afraid. All that he wanted, then, was to know how well his speech had worked, and if his rhetoric had paid off.

The judge looked up from his table and read out some of what he had written. 'These men, who have no respect for the Indian Constitution, the government, its legal system, and its women, have no right to live for even another minute. Therefore, I order that these men be hanged to death within the next 24 hours.'

Murthy, who stood there unable to believe what just happened, remembered what happened on the day he had confronted Daya about ethics. Daya had said that people like him were useless, for they neither sacrificed their life for preserving the sanctity of justice, nor did they enjoy the excesses of the system to make money for their family. Murthy had accused Daya of being an accomplice to Vasu's illegal activities. In response, Daya had asked Murthy if he had done anything for the people of Vizag, and why he hadn't eliminated Vasu, if he was actually concerned about injustice. Little did Murthy know then that the same Daya would go on to give up his life in the noble pursuit of justice for a common girl and her family.

Murthy hung his head in shame and tried stopping those thoughts from coming back into his mind. Daya looked at Vasu and his brothers with a sarcastic smile that rubbed them the wrong way. Victory was glowing in his eyes as he looked all around. Fearless of death and happy that justice would be delivered to Deepti and her family, he walked out of the court satisfied.

As he came out, Sanvi ran to him and hugged him. She started crying. He hugged her back. 'Why did you do this, Daya? What is going to happen to me now? Why did you take the blame upon yourself? How will I live without you?' Her rhetorical questions, whose answers she already knew, made Daya laugh thinking about how emotions overpowered logic in such situations. He walked away without uttering a word as she stood there looking at him.

The doctor who had conducted the autopsy on Deepti's body, and who also lead important protests through the course of this case, walked up to Daya and slapped him hard. 'You inhuman dog! How were you born? Kill this brute, kill him!', she shouted at Daya. A few women constables there held her back, and Murthy started screaming. 'You are making a great mistake. You don't know the severity of the mistake that you are committing. He is a living God! You don't know how great he is.' As he was walking to the jeep, Vasu's brothers were still attempting to escape from the strong clutches, so that they could beat up Daya.

Murthy had once told Daya, 'It would be very nice if a wave comes and takes you off this shore. How many lives will be better because of one death.' Daya repeated that again when he passed Murthy and then added, 'The tsunami that you asked for is here, Murthy.', and he laughed. Murthy, already regretting how cold he was to a man like Daya, now folded his hands in front of Daya to express remorse, and cried. Daya laughed again and got into the jeep.

As they were all taken into the prison to be hanged the next day, Vasu was once again glued to the TV screen. He was hearing all that was being said about his brothers. The shame, the disrespect and the hatred exerted towards his brothers was unbearable. One of the news anchors said, 'This is the most sensational judgment in the history of the Supreme Court.' Vasu changed the channel. A news reader in a suit read, 'The culprits are going to be hanged to death within a day.' As all the news channels kept harping on about the same, Vasu lost patience and left the room.

Despite knowing that the whole business was out of hand, he relentlessly thought about ways to stop the death sentence. He went through all his old contacts to check for some distant politician who was once his friend and could be begged for help. 'In another ten hours, the five people including an ex-police officer charged with raping and murdering Deepti, will be hanged.', read another news anchor on a channel that Sanvi was no longer watching.

Sanvi hadn't eaten anything since she arrived home from the court. The dogs, birds, cats, and rabbits in the house weren't fed yet either. Sanvi's mother, thankfully, took care of the necessities of the animals and birds. Sanvi refused to move away from the TV. She sat glued to it and was hoping to at least see his face for one last time. 'Unlike never before, the whole nation is glued to their television sets, waiting for the five rapists to be hanged to death.' read an anchor.

Venkat Rao was watching the same news channel, along with his granddaughter in the house that had now been restored to him. He thought how tragic it would have been if Daya hadn't transformed himself into an honest saviour. He would have had to surrender the land that he had bought with so many years of painstaking and diligent effort for negligible compensation.

The thought that someone like Daya had transformed, apologize to him, returned his land and decided to sacrifice his life to get justice for an unknown girl, made his eyes swell with tears, washing his unshaved cheeks. His granddaughter was told that Daya was a very important person for their family and that he was now being charged in a wrong case. She sat with Venkat Rao and gazed at the TV clueless about what would follow.

Meanwhile in the prison, the four of Vasu's brothers were jailed in one cell, while Daya was placed in a separate cell opposite to them. They exchanged cold glances for a long time. Daya laughed at one of these moments. This enraged the

already infuriated brothers. ‘You told the court we are psychos? You are the psycho!’, they screamed.

‘What do you want as your final meal?’, asked a police officer, who came there with his constables to make a note of the menu. ‘Food, eh? We are so close to death and you are asking us what we want to eat! Are you mad?’, one of the brothers shouted at the officer. Even as they were shouting at the officer, Daya started making his request. The officer had to then ignore the brothers and move to the opposite cell. ‘Lentils, ghee, mango pickle, brinjal curry, sambhar, and papad,’ he said. One of the news anchors started reading out what Daya had asked for. Sanvi, listening to this, realized this was the food she was telling him about at the beach on her birthday, just before Vasu’s men had mistaken her for Lakshmi and had kidnapped her. On understanding how badly he missed her to do things that reminded him of her on his last day, she cried even more.

Vasu also watched that news channel and switched to another one. There, a reporter told the viewers that the other four prisoners had stopped eating. Vasu couldn’t help stop the tears from running down his cheeks.

Chapter 14

With only ninety minutes left to the hanging, the five prisoners were taken to the spot where they were to be hanged. The four brothers, on seeing the noose, tried running away. They had hardly taken two steps before the constables grabbed them by their shoulders, and dragged them to the spot. With such high security, last-minute escape attempts are indeed futile. Their handcuffs were removed. They were made to stand in front of the noose that was soon to claim their lives.

Daya was calm and in fact happy that his rhetoric finally paid off. To see the four criminals hanged before his eyes was such a boon to have earned. Flashes of the scenes in which the woman was raped came back to him. He could recollect Vasu's brothers and what they did to her. The enormous torture that she went through was indefensible. He took rightful pride in having brought them to justice and at having taught a lesson to all the potential rapists in the country. Daya had to walk to the noose.

His life had begun by witnessing the worst of everything: poverty, thirst, hunger, and no one to show him the right path. He was his own guide. He was his philosopher. He was his teacher. He had chosen the path of earning money by hook or crook. He had chosen the profession of a cop so that he could earn money with the uniform rightfully and royally. He indeed succeeded in that.

He was a bad cop who could do anything and everything for money.

But no one guessed, or understood the journey of Daya's character. Even Daya didn't know himself that well to realize that if the bad cop in him turned out to be a good cop, he could do anything and everything for justice.

He laughed loudly when he realized that even this deliverance of justice had happened through malpractice. 'For a few people, corruption is inseparable from their way of life', he mumbled to himself. The police officers monitoring him wondered what was happening. Someone accused and convicted of rape and torture was walking towards death—laughing and talking to himself. This couldn't be the laughter of those philosophers who, realizing the wonder and complexity of life, eventually had the last laugh, one officer thought. They wouldn't be surprised if only they knew the degree of transformation Daya had gone through in last few days. Daya indeed had the last laugh at life.

The wave had to ebb now. It had to recede from the shore after a short-lived sabbatical from oblivion and eternity. On its way back it traced all that it had managed to surf across to get to shore. The pebbles that naturally lay on the way, the garbage that human civilization threw into the waters, the other beings that waded to the shore comfortably on the backs of the hardworking wave and all the squabbles with fellow waves that had to be settled by way of a rough negotiation to travel together to the shore of the glimmering earth.

Flashes of memory were all he had time for. The few remaining steps towards death left him with very little time to make a coherent narrative out of all his memories and craft his biography.

Those ugly moments of running for money, his corruptive thought process, selfishness, detachment with the world, unethical actions, and above all, that fateful day of 2nd October, Gandhi Jayanti, where the bad cop in him released the four brothers in exchange for money and a fabulous bungalow. If he had not released them that day, the innocent girl would have reached her home safely, her mother would have seen her, and that family would have been living happily that day.

Like the great philosopher Aristotle said, life gives every bad human being an opportunity to become good and set everything right. But very few can identify this only opportunity, as most dig their heads in depression and believe that they don't have any way of escaping from their sinful world. They feel trapped in the dark world believing it has no exit. Little does one know that if one decides to undo their bad deeds, if one decides to set everything right, if one decides to live the rest of his life or even die as a good human being, one can always identify the golden chance that God offers.

Daya identified that precious opportunity, so amongst all the sinners, only he became an approver for the crime that he never committed. He opened the door to justice, at the cost of his life.

Daya was walking towards death with a smile and a sense of pride, peace, and victory over evil. He stood right in front of the death, offering it a warm welcome.

The officer pulled a black mask on his face. As though the life of those to be hanged and the future of their unerring kids were not bleak enough, they had to be covered with a black cloth to complete the darkness looming around their world. The noose went around Daya's neck and his hands were tied behind him. Daya screamed Sanvi's name into the air one last time. 'Sanvi!', he shouted to his heartful. As a part of the officers customary go ahead, the flaps that held Daya's legs on the stage were withdrawn with the help of a lever. With a thud, his body was pulled to the ground by gravity, but the rope refused to let it go.

Daya won the battle for justice.

He gave his life for justice.

And Daya lived after his death.

The End