

Perfect lives,
damaged double lives.



Means *to an* End

K Vaishali

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About the Author

K Vaishali is an Indian author, born in Tiruchchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. She grew up in Madras, went to school in Delhi, managed a cinema theatre in Bombay and worked for a social start-up in Ahmedabad. Currently, she lives in Hyderabad, where she is doing her Masters in Communication from Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication.

Trisha made a conscious effort to retain only those aspects of her life that reflected well on her. To facilitate this, she frequently assessed all aspects of her life and made adjustments. It was her way of making sure that she lived a grand enviable life, full of grand enviable things, someday soon. Sitting on the pot in the early hours of the morning, she realised she was due for another one of these adjustments. She couldn't help by re-read Dev's message again:

Hey... Sorry, I won't be able to give you a ride to work today. I have that annual meeting thing I forgot to tell you about. Will reach work after lunch.

She was supposed to hitch a ride with him. But why, she thought. She was no longer dating him, and more importantly, she was married to Sumir. Her carpooling with her boss might stir up bad gossip. She held the exclusive attention of both Sumir and Dev today, and sure that felt good, but she couldn't go on this way, not at the risk of appearing unfaithful! It was time to get rid of Dev.

Even though her marriage to Sumir was "arranged", for the most part, it wasn't deliberately orchestrated. In fact, their marriage was a result of a series of coincidences. For them to be matched, both their parents' had to simultaneously and persistently insist

that they must marry, and at the same time she and Sumir had to exhibit a willingness. Then, across ten matrimonial websites filtered for age, native place, caste and financial status, they had to find each other among a throng of over two thousand matches each. Such were the odds.

To put things in better perspective, it happened so: Sumir, the eager groom, made a vow to God Hanuman that he would marry only after his law firm made a turnover of ten lakh rupees. Though he started with the ambitious vow of fifty lakh rupees in profit, mounting pressure from his mother led to multiple revisions of said vow, ultimately settling at ten lakh rupees in turnover (not even profit!) before the year ended. He achieved the target that financial year and set out to find his bride by cautiously picking five matrimonial websites and creating premium accounts on them. His approach was to analyse the profiles of as many women as possible, but to send out marriage proposals to only those with whom he felt a real connection. On the first day, he sent 82 marriage proposals. On the second day, he sent out 67. The third day, however, he sent only twenty six more, his spirits dampened by the lack of response to his proposals. He felt better when his mother told him to give it time - Such decisions could be overwhelming for a woman. Sumir proposed to Trisha along with the twenty five other women on that day.

Trisha's father, Manoj, was using a computer for the third time in his life. He was uploading Trisha's

profile on to a matrimonial website that his brother's daughters had found a match on. Within minutes, he received an email:

The following suitor(s) want your hand in marriage:

Sumir Saxena

"Hi, I am Sumir. 33 years old. I have been practicing law for 8 years in my own firm. I am 5'10". I am a good-looking, simple, decent and down-to-earth guy. I am looking for a traditional, fun-loving and good-looking girl with good family values."

Manoj blushed, opened Sumir's profile and read aloud to his wife, who was in disbelief that such good people existed on the computer. Not only was he a lawyer, but he had a successful practice of his own! Manoj was attracted to self-made men. He himself had a button manufacturing business, passed down from his great-grandfather, which he co-owned with twelve of his brothers and cousins. It was a matter of pride to him that hundred years later, this company still fed twelve families. He saw in Sumir everything his great-grandfather had been. He was so enamoured by Sumir that he didn't even check the profiles of the other proposals he received. He wanted to send a quick reply, but it took him two days to understand how to accept a proposal made on the website.

Sumir received the following mail:

Congratulations! The following suitor(s) have accepted your proposal for marriage.

Trisha Kumar

"Let our families meet and discuss the details on the 24th of November at our place."

Trisha's reply touched Sumir's heart, and the hearts of all those in his family, who felt like they had found the exact kind of bride that they all were looking for. Although, Sumir had received three other responses, Trisha was definitely the best-looking. His decision was cemented when his mother told him that his astrological charts were compatible with hers.

There was one minor glitch. Trisha had no idea that her father had accepted a marriage proposal on her behalf. However, her father knew it wouldn't take too much to convince her. Trisha was almost thirty. If she didn't marry now, it would be impossible for her to find a decent groom later.

Trisha wasn't a stranger to that fact. She had begun asking, even begging Dev to marry her. But married life didn't appeal to him. In fact, in the four years that they had been dating, they broke up almost every month when she grew tired of him not taking any efforts to emotionally bond with her or even call her his girlfriend. But she always went back to him; she was convinced she could change his ways. Coincidentally, right when she reached the end of her tether, her father asked her to marry Sumir. She agreed without even looking at Sumir's profile by

simply saying “I accept whatever you think is best for me, *papa*.” To stop herself from returning to Dev, she insisted that the wedding take place at the earliest auspicious date. Sumir and Trisha tied the knot in a grand celebration on the 24th of January.

Trisha, still sitting on her pot, had long forgotten Dev and was back to her favorite pastime – fantasizing about her perfect life. Her idea of a perfect life had remained the same throughout. As she grew older, she only added more details to it. She wanted a pleasant family life, where her husband and her in-laws treated her with respect and admiration. She wanted to maintain good relations with her own extended family and that of her husband’s. She wanted to be seen as the quintessential modern woman, an ambitious workaholic, who held a respectable position in a respectable company, and a family woman, who everyone relied on, and who in turn, made them feel loved and cared for. She wanted to show the world that women could have it all if they found the right balance between work and family life. But now she was late for work. She folded up her thoughts, laid them aside and rushed to get ready.

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Dev was looking at a glass of water, thinking of something to think about, while avoiding those around him to save himself from the awkwardness of eye contact. He was at the Company's Annual Performance Appraisal Luncheon. Kishore was leading the meeting and with him were Vasudev, Sheetal and Sushil. They were seated in the restaurant of one of the finest hotels in Mumbai. The glassware in this fine restaurant was so clean that the waiters carrying them appeared as if they were miming. The plates sharply sparkled in an otherwise dimly lit room.

The agenda of the meeting was to informally discuss the financial and operational affairs of Teil Ltd. They did this, in the month of April, after the end of every financial year. None of them were keen to sit through the meeting. None of them, that is, except Mr Kishore, the dedicated CEO, who looked forward to giving lectures in meetings throughout the year.

"We have to step it up this year!", dedicated Mr Kishore would say, practicing in front of a mirror. "We have had to struggle to reach where we are – the county's finest oil refinery," he said with his chest swollen with pride. "But we are not done. We have to struggle just the same to retain this position, and a bit more to keep moving ahead. Times are tough."

Every night, he would practice saying these very lines, over and over again, till he had perfected the voice modulation and the facial expressions. Even though he had been saying the same thing every year for the twenty years that he had been a CEO, six of which, they had actually been the best oil refinery, "... that is no reason to be unprepared," said dedicated Mr. Kishore to his wife, to whom he read the speech out every week for feedback.

So, on went good old Kishore. "We are important, ladies and gentlemen," he said, pausing to make eye contact with each and every person on the table, a slight grin curving around his bushy moustache. "We are the names and the faces of the greatest oil company in this country," he said, smiling wider. "We are the reason this country runs as smooth as its engines," He laughed out loud. He was a fine motivator and he knew it.

Dev sighed. Kishore had cracked that very joke in the meeting they had the year before. At this mental mention of the year before, his consciousness rushed to a thought that he immediately tried to stop, but was unsuccessful. The year before was the year Dev had been promoted from Regional Manager – Mumbai to General Manager and Head of Operations – West, selected as a new and valuable member for such and other yearly discussions. Dev succumbed to his brain's desire to recall the details of that meeting. He remembered not sleeping at all the night, worried sick that he would disappoint Kishore. It had been a great honour for him, as it would have been for anybody

in India or in fact, anywhere in the world, to meet Kishore. It was a greater honour, however, to work under Kishore's leadership and guidance, something his friends and everybody who knew he worked for Kishore, had been jealous of.

Kishore was considered the number one role model among the Indian business tycoons. He had done what was commonly considered as the most admirable thing for anyone to do – he had managed to become rich and successful, despite being born in a poor family of little means and opportunities. Everybody loved him for it. Some even saluted him inconspicuously when they saw him pass by on branch visits. Lakhs of fathers and mothers spent hours hoping their sons would grow up to be just like him. They even went to the extent of praying to God for it. "God, make my son exactly like Mr. Kishore. That's all I want in my humble little life. Take everything that is mine and do this for me, I beg of you," they would say and donate hundreds of rupees to temples and to priests. Everybody was fond of this religious barter system, including Dev's parents. Praying aside, they also drove Dev hard to pursue chemical engineering in one of India's best colleges, grooming him for campus placements. He consequently joined Teil Ltd. as the project manager for one of the refineries in Mumbai, twelve years ago, dreaming of someday becoming just like Kishore.

His preparations for the last year's meeting was something Dev remembered with embarrassment. He did everything a man could do to pamper himself without feeling extremely silly. He

started by buying a hair gel for himself, this being something he had always wanted to try. He started loving the touch of gel on his hands, and so he traded his shaving cream for a shaving gel. Then, he changed his after-shave from lotion to gel and even started brushing his teeth with gel toothpaste. He got a black suit made with cloth of the finest quality, splurging on the best cuff links, ties, belts, black shoes and cologne money could buy. He then pampered his laptop with a leather case. Then, he arranged the folders on his laptop's desktop systematically and changed his wallpaper from his favourite rock band poster to a picture of an endless blue sky. But even after all this he felt unprepared, and in a mad impulse, shaved all of his chest hair. He remembered how he avoided seeing Trisha privately for weeks after that because he knew that she would ridicule him. But he was confident of his preparations.

However, there was a small problem. The venue of last year's meeting was a hotel, which led Dev to believe that the company must have booked a conference hall where Kishore would give a presentation on a projector, and he had dressed accordingly in a formal manner. When he discovered that the meeting was only a casual lunch without any presentations or laptops, he felt like a circus clown. The dress code was business casual which, to Dev's horror, meant no tie, jacket, laptop or suitcase. It wasn't Dev's fault. It had happened because of a change in the corporate trend that Dev wasn't aware of. Leaders in India emulating

the American corporate trend, decided that over and above all formal meetings, the top management was to meet for a casual luncheon once a year. This was meant as a bonding exercise for these senior managers, who worked from different cities, to help them communicate and understand each other more effectively. Taking this in his stride, Kishore adapted quickly, breaking the awkward silences at these luncheons by discussing the company's performance – the one thing he believed every employee in the top management was commonly enthusiastic about. Poor Dev had to sit through that meeting in awkwardness, and to compensate for his appearance, gave alert responses to Kishore's questions, becoming Kishore's favourite employee. Dev despised that day.

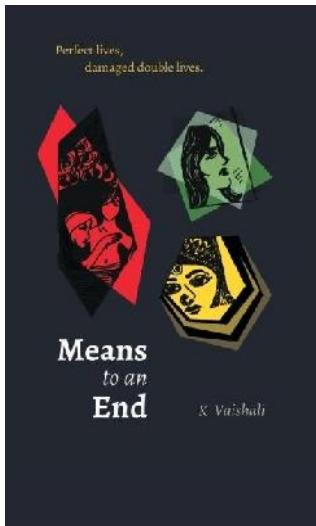
Even though hierarchically, Dev was to report to Vasudev, who was to report to Kishore, Kishore and Dev often skipped a step and discussed business with each other. In the company, Dev was in charge of making sure operational targets were met by oil refineries and sales targets were met by all the regional branches in the western part of India. This included sending reports made by his subordinates to the country's operations and sales head, who, in turn, accumulated these figures from all parts of India to make further reports. These reports were also used to find areas that needed attention and troubleshooting and the operational and sales heads sent suggestions to Dev, who passed them on to the appropriate branch for implementation. Dev marked a copy of all these mails to his managerial head, Vasudev, the Vice

President of the company. Recently, upon Kishore's request, he also marked a copy to Kishore. Kishore made sure he always gave feedback to Dev's emails which Dev stopped reading after the first two emails as they were brutally long and usually repetitive.

Nobody had ever complained about Dev's performance in the company and so, as a fun challenge, he kept finding ways to slack off from his work. He decided that the level of involvement he had the first time someone warned him of his carelessness, would be the level of work he would do from then on. Since it hadn't happened in the last six months, he was slacking off from his duties progressively. Lately, all he did was forward emails and sanction leave applications. He checked operational and sales reports and compared it with the target set for that quarter once a week but was considering doing it only every fortnight from the next month on. He wondered if he could ever attain complete detachment from work without anyone noticing. Even though he was Kishore's favourite, and that meant forwarding more emails than otherwise, an optimist Dev nodded to himself at the possibility.

Dev wanted to get rid of having to sanction leave applications as soon as he could. It was boring work. The problem in sanctioning leave applications was to check and make sure no employee took a leave of absence during staff meetings, for which attendance was compulsory. He thought he could mark these meeting dates in his calendar but he didn't want to go through doing something as dull as that, given that

these meetings came around quite often and were usually postponed more than once. Within moments, Dev thought of a cunning plan. He thought of sending an email to all his employees about a new corporate rule, which stated that taking a holiday during staff meetings was banned and in extreme cases, a person was to consult with his boss through phone or in person before sending a written leave application email. This corporate rule didn't exist, of course; Dev had made it up. But then, he thought of all the drivel corporate emails were full of, and he had no interest in doing that much work, even if it meant he would save a lot of time otherwise. Soon enough, Dev managed to come up with a clever workaround. He knew that there was nobody better to write the email for him than the Human Resource (HR) department. He decided to talk to the HR department, suggesting the rule he had come up with, sprinkling in some lamentations about how his precious time was wasted reviewing leave applications. He wasn't even lying! Dev smiled for the first time that morning.



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