

# The Acquisition

SONALI GOGATE



# The Acquisition

**Sonali Gogate**

Sonali has over twenty years of experience in the IT industry. She started her career as software developer and after a successful and fulfilling career left the IT industry as a Technical Director at end of 2014. She has worked for some startups as well as global giants such as Microsoft and has lived in different parts of India as well as the US. She is now based in Pune.

She loves to read and has been surrounded by books from childhood. Her hobbies also include traveling and trekking/hiking. She has travelled extensively within and outside India; sometimes alone, sometimes with friends and sometimes with strangers. She has also trekked in different parts of the Himalayas. She has met interesting people from different walks of life and has been through some challenging situations, thanks to her adventures.

Her first novel, 'The Ripple Effect' published in 2016 by Vishwakarma Publications is a mystery with the backdrop of software industry.

# The Acquisition

---

**Sonali Gogate**

This book is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, places and occurrences are the product of author's imagination. Any resemblance to any events or locales or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## Acknowledgements:

I thank Rahul Rao, Director, Foliage Outdoors, for providing me information about snakes around Pune, which I needed for a very important incident in my novel.

Having the right title for a book is crucial and for giving my novel its appropriate title, 'The Acquisition', I thank Sharad Gogate, my father. I also thank him for reading my manuscript in detail and giving me very valuable feedback.

I thank Motiya Basargekar, my sister for reading it in two days and telling me what works, what doesn't and where more detailing is required.

My mother, Shubhada Gogate is a voracious reader and so her feedback and input was very important for me. I thank her for reading it quickly in spite of her health issues and giving me suggestions for some important modifications.

I also thank Anand Iyer and Chinmoy Bhagawat for taking time out from their extremely busy schedules to read my manuscript and for giving me their honest feedback.

I have enjoyed works of Judith McNaught a lot. Her contemporary novels, especially 'Paradise' and 'Someone to watch over me' have inspired me partly to write this novel.

## Prologue

It was an early morning in April and Upendra Date had a busy day ahead of him. In his Bungalow in the well-known gated society on Baner road, the dining room faced east and he already felt warm at the head of the table; a clear indication that it was going to be a hot day. He sat there feeling impatient and restless.

“It is too hot even for April.” he said aloud.

He looked at the big wall clock once again. He had told Anupama to have the breakfast ready by 8:30 AM. Why wasn't the breakfast here yet? Where was Anu? Why was she in the kitchen? He liked seeing his wife at the table having breakfast with him! He didn't want her to be the maid serving it! He looked towards his right where his mother sat and was taking out her pills patiently. She was not paying him any attention. She seemed to do that too often these days. It really annoyed him!

“Anu!!” he finally called out.

“Latabai has not come in today, so Anu is having to take care of everything,” his mother explained in a soft voice.

“What is the point in telling this to me? I have to leave at exactly 9:00. If things are not going to be ready, just tell me that!”

Thankfully, just then Anupama came in from the kitchen carrying a tray with toasted slices of bread and omelettes. She put the tray on the table and started serving Upendra.

He looked around and barked, “Cutlery?”

Anupama put a set next to his plate and then said, “Would you like milk or tea?”

“Milk!” Upendra almost yelled. “I don't have time to sit around and wait for your tea!”

She didn't react to his taunt, and went about serving Akka. As she walked towards the kitchen, Upendra looked at her and felt another bout of annoyance. She had become so dull, so lifeless. Did she not have any thoughts or feelings about anything?

He still remembered how she had been when he had first seen her all those years ago. Anupama had been singing a song on stage in a function in her

college when he had gone there to talk about possibly instituting a scholarship in his father's name. He had thought she was really beautiful and innocent. Upendra had decided right away that he wanted her as his wife.

They were married for thirty years but she had not been anything like the real life partner that he had hoped for. He had realised within a few years of getting married that she would never be what he wanted in a woman.

However, she was a wonderful mother, Upendra acknowledged. He felt quite proud about his daughters. Both of them had done well in education; both played very good tennis too. Both were admired for their looks and manners by his relatives and friends.

He had wanted a son, but Anu could not give him one. Anu had had two miscarriages after the two daughters were born and then the doctor had given him a warning and insisted that he stop insisting on more children; it was dangerous for Anu to get pregnant again. That had been a shock to him. He had so hoped for a son. But of course, when told that it was dangerous for her what could he do! After that second miscarriage, Anu had gone and stayed with her parents for almost four months. She had taken both the girls with her. Manasi had been eight then and Rachana four.

That was the first time he had had an affair. It was out of loneliness and feeling of loss – loss of hope of having a son. And there had been a lot of tension at the factory. It had been with his then secretary, who he had to let go afterwards for the fear of Anu finding out.

Now, thinking back he felt that it was after that second miscarriage that Anu had become completely quiet. She had stopped asking him anything and she didn't show any interest in anything he did. She had also had no interest in sex. She never said 'no' to him when he turned to her for it, but she never asked for it and she never seemed to find any pleasure in it. First he had thought it must be due to the miscarriage but that just didn't change.

Upendra looked up when his mother said, "Rachana had called last evening. She was asking if she can come home for the summer."

"Why did she go to Paris for her studies if she wanted to come home every six months?" He had not liked that she had chosen to study French. That even after long discussions had not listened to him, not agreed to study engineering or science. What good was studying French? And then to spend so much money on studying it! Not that money was a problem, but he felt it was such a waste!

Manasi had at least chosen to study engineering. A son who had done engineering would have been better but since he couldn't have that, he was glad that at least one of his daughters had chosen to be an engineer. But then she had gone to the US for post-graduation. After that she had taken up a job with Microsoft. He wondered if she would ever come back to India now! Especially now that she was engaged and her fiancé too was in the US.

"Why is the milk taking so long?" He was feeling very restless. Too many thoughts seemed to be crowding their way in his brain. He was feeling the beginning of a headache now. That was not a good thing. He had too many things to take care today.

He needed to go to NDS, his software company and have a chat with Niranjan about the email he had gotten from Scott of ZipMake. It was good that Niranjan was in charge, he would be able to take care of the quality issues mentioned by Scott. Then he needed to go to the factory. They were late on the Tata order and he had to sit there and ensure it went out this evening! When Upendra had started the software company, it was in the premises of N D Enterprises, but then Abhijit Deodhar, his cousin who was running NDS had convinced him to setup a separate facility and seven years back he had then convinced Upendra to move NDS to Baner road. It was alright when Abhijit was running it, but then he decided to leave and Upendra had to commute between the MIDC in PCMC and Baner road. In the last few years the software industry in Pune had bloomed and the traffic was a complete mess, thanks to that! Even the thought of going to both the places on the same day annoyed Upendra. That was one of the reasons of his annoyance today.

Just as Anu was coming in with milk in a big mug, Upendra's cell phone started ringing. He looked at it in annoyance but then picked it up quickly. "Yes, Deshpande," his floor manager from the factory was on the line. Anupama and Akka, Upendra's mother both were startled when he suddenly stood up. "How the hell can he go on leave today?" He listened for a few seconds and then yelled in the phone again, "I don't care! Tell him to get in today! Or tell him to talk to me!" Upendra cut the phone and sat down. He felt some tingling along his right arm, and then it seemed to go numb. He shook it vigorously to get rid of that feeling.

Anu kept the mug of milk in front of him along with two pills and said,

“The doctor has asked to take the BP medication twice now.”

“I have not lost my memory,” he said sarcastically. Anu was looking at him with concern and he said, “Why are you looking at me like that?” But it didn’t come out quite right. What the hell!

The phone rang again and he tried to pick it up, but he could not hold the phone. He just could not get a grip. He tried to get up from the chair, but his right leg gave way, and before he knew what was happening, he had collapsed on the floor in a heap. He wanted to say something but could not.

His mother was saying something sounding quite scared and then Anu was next to him. She called out to him couple of times, but he could not respond. He tried to reach out to her but he could not lift his right arm. He stretched out his left one; Anu held it and said, “I am here.”

The last thing he was aware of was Anu talking on the phone “Doctor, Upendra has...”

That was the last thing he heard, then it was all blank!



## CHAPTER ONE

Manasi's corner office had a nice view of the western horizon but in the last six months she had managed to watch the sunset only twice. In the beginning when she started using this office, she kept thinking of it as her father's office, but lately she had been thinking about it as hers; as also about the software company.

The company was started by her father about fifteen years back and since his manufacturing company, named after her grandfather Narayan Date, was called N. D. Enterprises, the software company was named N. D. Software. Originally it was started only to serve ND Enterprise's big customers like Bajaj and Tata. But soon they had started taking on software projects independently from other manufacturers. A few years down the line they were had also started working with international customers. Today, NDS employed more than 500 software professionals and worked as much with international customers as with the Indian ones.

It was mid-November now and the days had started becoming noticeably shorter. But the weather had not yet cooled down enough to seem like winter. She found her mind wander to the previous year, this time. She had been planning a vacation with Rakesh for Christmas holidays. Manasi reflected that it would be getting really rainy and days would be getting really short in Seattle. She had spent five years in the Puget Sound, and some days, she felt like leaving everything and rushing back there, to her job at Microsoft, to be with Rakesh. She sighed and after a quick look outside the window she turned back to her laptop. She had promised her mother that she would be home before six so that they could go for the program of classical music that her mother was keen on. She checked the time once again before starting the next email.

When she was almost done, she heard a knock on her door. She looked around towards the cabin door and groaned to herself when she saw Niranjana. She sighed but then made herself smile and indicated that he could come in. He came in and sat down in the chair on the other side of the big glass top table.

Niranjana Pagey was the General Manager responsible for project delivery and new business for the US accounts of the company. At forty four he was

fifteen years older than Manasi. He was with NDS from the beginning and Upendra Date, Manasi's father had seen Niranjana as his successor. But when Upendra collapsed, the board had not been willing to leave the company in Niranjana's care. Surprisingly, they had preferred Manasi over him. Manasi, had no management experience what so ever; she had worked for only about five years since completing her M.S. at an American university and that too in a software product company in the US!

When Niranjana had made his displeasure known about her stepping in and taking charge, Manasi had not been surprised. After all, he was an experienced person and was now suddenly having to report to someone very junior, moreover someone with practically no experience in the field. It was quite surprising that he had not left the company and Manasi had wondered on multiple occasions why he hadn't.

Manasi had hoped that over time, they could come to an understanding and work together. But six months down the line she was still struggling to figure out how to work with him effectively. In fact things had gotten worse over the time.

She had found multiple projects in his business unit that were not run well and had forced the teams to make changes. She had found that though Niranjana always said a lot good things about managing projects and teams, he didn't practice any of those himself. It seemed that he only wanted to tell others what to do!

She struggled to get any support from him, even on small matters. While talking he said all the right things, he always told her that he was there and that she should tell him if she needed any help. But whenever she looked to him to take on some challenge; needed any advice or needed something done urgently, he always had an excuse to turn down the request. He either had too much on his plate, had a personal commitment to keep or had no background in it.

Manasi felt like running away on seeing the state of some of the projects and dissatisfaction levels amongst the customers as well as the project teams. She had been addressing the issues depending on their criticality. Now she was trying to bring in some process changes and some restructuring of the teams for which she had support from the teams and the project managers.

Today, she had a good understanding of their customer base, their pricing model, their salary structure and overall financial status of the company.

Vikram Agashe, NDS's Chief Financial Officer was an ex-Army man and liked discipline. Manasi quickly understood that this person would always be straight forward and think about the company first. He helped her understand the finances in his capacity as the CFO but she had also started going to him for advice on other matters now.

Six months down the line, Manasi had two big challenges; Chandrika Dhake the HR head and Nirranjan. Slowly she had come to feel that both of them were spoilt by her father because he had allowed them to do as they pleased and were not made to think about consequences of their decisions or actions. She was unsure about how to handle either of them effectively and how to get support.

At present, one of her challenges was seated across the table with the trademark sulky expression. He opened the conversation with, "I am calling the team tomorrow. We can't do the milestone delivery today."

Manasi was surprised to hear this. "I ran into Gaurav some time back and he said it can go out today." Gaurav Vaidya was the lead on the project. The team had worked last two weekends and Manasi was reluctant to call them on another Saturday.

Nirranjan shook his head saying, "It's already five, and we will need four or five more hours. It would be best to come in early tomorrow and finish by lunch time."

Manasi put her elbows on the table and leaned forward, "But Gaurav needs to travel tomorrow morning. He is off next week."

"You expect me to adjust the project deliveries to suit individuals' vacation plans?" Nirranjan said with a condescending smile.

"He has planned well in advance, it is not right to ask him to change or cancel at the last minute..."

"I can't stay late today, I have promised my wife I'll be home to take her shopping," Nirranjan sat back folding his arms.

"Can't you go tomorrow?" It annoyed Manasi to have to have this kind of conversation with such a senior person.

"So I should change my plans but these junior folks will not change their plans right?" Nirranjan said being completely unreasonable and not caring. "You are changing the basic principles followed by this company, spoiling the junior folks, forcing the seniors to adjust. If Upendra was here, I wouldn't

need to have this conversation!”

“Well, he is not here. I am. I think the team should work late tonight and try to complete the delivery.” Manasi decided to be firm.

“Then I suggest that you stay back and guide the team. I have to leave. You can’t expect me to keep adjusting all the time,” Niranjana said and then looked away.

Manasi felt like pointing out that she had not seen him adjust even once in the last six months, but let it go. “But the communication needs to go from you.”

“So, once it’s ready Gaurav can call me and send the details,” he said and got up.

Manasi sighed when he left. She really should figure out how to handle this guy and not let him push things around to suit him.

She walked out to the concerned team and found Gaurav at his desk going over some code. He saw her and got up saying, “Hi Manasi. I only need to fix this one bug and then we can run the complete test pass.”

“OK. How long do you think it will take?” She asked.

“I need to figure out the bug. The test pass will be an hour or so.”

Manasi nodded and went back to her office. She called her mother, apologized profusely and explained why she had to cancel the plans at the last minute. Then she suggested that her mother go for the program with her cousin and friend Madhavi, who lived close by.

It was 10:42 p.m. when she switched off the light in her cabin and walked towards the glass door leading out to the lifts and stairs. She and Gaurav had struggled to figure out the issue. Finally around 10:15, they had managed to identify the problem and Gaurav had told her that he would compile and run the test pass. As she passed Gaurav’s workstation he looked up and said, “It seems to be working alright. After the test pass should I send this to Scott?”

Manasi knew that Niranjana would not like the communication to go from someone else. “Call Niranjana,” she said.

Gaurav looked hesitant and Manasi understood his reluctance. Niranjana’s insensitivity and his lack of people management skills were issues that she would need to tackle at some point but she didn’t want to get into that right now. She did what she could and advised Gaurav on how to work with

Niranjan. “Call him right away and tell him that we have fixed the show stopper. Tell him when he can expect you to give the detailed report. Don’t wait to complete the test pass to call him.”

She walked out of the glass door and the security guard in the lobby got up to salute her. “Good night madam,” He said.

“Good night, Ramsingh”, she replied and pressed the lift’s call button. Normally she would take the stairs but she didn’t feel like climbing down all the floors now. It also made Ramsingh feel better that she was using the lift.

When she came in six months back, she had tried to tell the security personnel not to salute her, but they said they had always done that. Her father expected that and they could not, not do that when she was the top boss now!

At the ground floor, her father’s Toyota Camry was at the building entrance and Arun, the driver was at the wheel. As she opened the door he looked at her and said, “Every day you are working late. It worries Madam”, he meant her mother.

“Kaka, she is glad that you are here to drive me home,” Manasi said with a soft smile.

Arun had been with her father from before Manasi’s birth. He was like a part of the family now. He was the one who had taught Rachana and Manasi how to drive.

Her father changed cars every four-five years. His latest was a Camry. Manasi herself drove a Civic back in the US. But driving a car in India was a different ball game all together and many times Manasi preferred to leave it to Arun Kaka. When she drove herself, she preferred to take the Honda Brio that she had purchased couple of months after she returned. Since she worked late most evenings, it was good to have Arun kaka drive her; more for her mother’s peace of mind than any real safety concern of her own, after all Pune was one of the safest cities in India.

Manasi got into the back seat of the car and looked outside the window. She enjoyed looking at the city at this time, the traffic was minimal and there was a relaxed feel to everything, even the blinking traffic lights. NDS was on Baner road and the drive home to her parents’ bungalow in Aundh was less than seven minutes at this time. She had grown up in Aundh and seen it go from a quiet, well off and mostly residential locality to a very busy and very

commercial part of the city. It had changed a lot even after she went off to the US for her post graduation, eight years ago. When the car reached the bungalow, not giving Arun kaka a chance to say anything, Manasi jumped out as soon as the car stopped at the gate and opened the side gate so that the car could be driven directly into the garage. She closed the gate and walked in from the side of the bungalow, to knock on the kitchen door.

Both her mother and grandmother had heard the car and she could hear them talking. Her mother opened the door and said, “Tell Arun Kaka that he can come in late tomorrow. Has he eaten anything?”

Her mother always cared about all the people who worked for them. Did her father care for them? She didn’t remember him ever asking caring questions.

Her grandmother was at the dining table. When Manasi came in from the kitchen, she said, “It’s so late, Manu! I get worried when I see you working so late every day.”

“It’s OK Akka. I don’t mind,” Manasi said with a distracted smile. Her grandmother’s name was Sulochana, but she was called Akka. All the people who called her Sulochana had left this world long ago; she had been Akka Date for a long time.

“You have taken on a challenge, dear girl!” Akka said and then moved about the table setting up a place for Manasi. Then she shook her head, “This is the age to get married so that you can have children.”

Manasi came closer, dropped her bag on a chair, then hugged Akka from behind and said, “Let me tell you a secret Akka!” Then she whispered in Akka’s ear, “I don’t need to get married for having kids!”

Akka slapped Manasi’s hand and said, “Don’t talk nonsense!!”

Manasi laughed, enjoying their banter. Then kissed Akka on the cheek and moved back. Akka smiled softly then and said, “Go say good night to daddy and then come have some dinner!”

The ground floor had three bedrooms, the master bedroom, Akka’s bedroom and a guest room. Manasi’s bedroom was on the first floor. After her father’s stroke, the guest room had been converted into a nursing room for him. When Manasi entered, he was put in a reclining position on the Fowler bed. Her mother was standing by his side.

His night nurse got up from the nurse's bed and made her way to the door saying, "I'll make some tea for myself."

Her father said something but Manasi couldn't understand it. Her mother was the only one who seemed to understand what he said these days. Manasi sat in the chair by the bed and said, "Hello Daddy."

Upendra stretched out his left arm and she held his hand. Then she smiled and went ahead to give him a quick update.

Upendra's face twisted, but Manasi understood that he was trying to smile. Then he freed his hand from hers, wiped his face and said something from the left side which came out all garbled.

But Anu smiled at him and said, "Yes, she is. Aren't you proud?" Then she turned to Manasi and said, "He is saying, you are doing well." Upendra was saying something else. Anu turned to him and then patted him on his shoulder. Upendra looked up at Anu and with his left hand held hers..

Manasi felt like she was intruding on a private moment between the two. She had never seen her parents like this before. She got up and both of them turned to her. Upendra then nodded and Anu said, "Go Manu, have dinner. It is very late."

Manasi came out a little dazed. She had dinner with Akka fussing over her like every night. But she was very quiet tonight unlike the other times.

"Manu, are you worried about the work?" Akka asked.

Manasi looked at her then and shook her head saying, "No Akka." Then she remembered the music program and asked, "Did Mamma go for the program?"

"Yes, she did," Akka said. "I am glad she is able to go for these music programs."

Manasi nodded and continued to eat. Then she said, "Akka, why don't you go to bed? I'll clear up here when I am done." She was glad when Akka actually agreed and went to her room.

It was almost midnight when Manasi climbed the steps to go to her room. This was the room she had shared with Rachana till she went to US for her post-graduation. She changed into the night clothes and then went into the balcony. She was tired but she knew she would not be able to sleep right away. She sat in the cane swing chair and looked at the half moon. This had

been her favourite spot in her college days. While the circumstances in which she had to come back were anything but pleasant, she was really glad to have this room. This was her sanctuary.

After about fifteen minutes, she got up and made a phone call to Gaurav. It was good to hear that the test pass was almost through and that Niranjana would be sending the communication as soon as it was done. Manasi had not realised that she was still tense but on hearing this, she relaxed and suddenly felt sleepy.

But once she got into the bed she couldn't sleep. She found herself thinking back to the time all their lives had changed course; when her life had taken an unplanned detour. She shivered thinking back to that horrible Friday in April when she had got an unexpected call from her mother early in the morning. Her mother had told her in a matter of fact way but in a toneless voice, that her father had suffered a stroke about ten hours earlier and was in an ICU now in a critical condition.

Manasi had rushed home of course. She had also arranged Rachana's travel such that both of them reached Mumbai within an hour of each other. They reached Pune together, almost two full days after the stroke and went directly to the hospital. Her father was in the ICU under observation and her mother was by his side. Looking at her, they felt more worried about her than him.

In the next four days, her father was declared out of danger, but he had lost use of his right side completely. He also could not speak. He was kept in the hospital for another week and then arrangements were made for home care.

Once the girls reached Pune, Anu had relaxed and slept for twelve hours straight. Then she had gone back to the hospital and stayed there with Upendra till he was discharged.

Akka at eighty two, was too frail to do any running around. But she ensured that her health didn't become an additional concern. For that she ate on time and took all her medicines without fail. She went to visit Upendra once every day in the morning and sat there for exactly two hours. And she had managed the home front.

Manasi had gone back after couple of weeks. But Akka and Anupama had talked to her before she left. They had wanted her to come back to take care of N. D. Software. Anupama didn't trust Niranjana. Manasi wondered if her own opinion today was biased because of that.



Manasi was engaged to Rakesh. He stood firmly by her in her time of need, said he would support her whatever she wanted to do. Yes, they would need to postpone their plans to be together, but he would let her decide. When she had decided to do what her mother and grandmother wanted, he had helped her in everything from shopping and packing to booking her ticket and storing her belongings.

Manasi smiled thinking about Rakesh and then sat up! “Oh Shit!!!”

It was his birthday today and she was supposed to have skype call with him at 9:30 p.m.. She had completely forgotten!! She picked up her phone and dialled his number but it went to voice message. She just told him that she would talk to him next morning at 8:30 a.m. her time and closed the call. She then setup an alarm for 8:15 a.m. on the phone and put it on the night stand by the bed. Then she switched off the light and said, “Go to sleep, you idiot!”

“Manu wake up!” Manasi heard her mother’s voice.

“Five minutes,” she said like always.

“No get up right away! Rakesh is on the phone,” Anupama said and Manasi sat up.

“I left him a message saying that we’ll have a skype call,” she said. “Didn’t he get my message?”

“He heard your message and was on line for good half hour before calling. Your phone is also off. So he called on the land line,” Anupama explained.

“Shit! Shit!! Shit!!!” Manasi said; then looking at her mother’s expression said, “Sorry. Sorry. Really!” Then she jumped out of the bed and said, “What time is it?”

“9:10”, Anupama replied and Manasi ran down the stairs to take the call.

She picked up the received and said, “Sorry, Sorry, Sorry!”

Rakesh laughed on the other side and said, “How many times are you going to apologise?” It made Manasi feel guilty. This was the third time in succession that she had missed being on line at the agreed upon time.

“Rakesh...,”

“You are busy, I understand,” Rakesh said. He didn’t sound angry. “But you can setup a reminder you know.”

Manasi closed her eyes as if in pain and said, “I did. But then the phone’s

battery went dead. Then she smiled, “Don’t be angry. I’ll make it up to you when we meet. Promise!” He was such a great guy. She was really lucky that he was going to be her husband.

“OK”, he said tentatively.

“I hope you had a great day,” Manasi said. “And wish you many happy returns!!”

“Thanks,” he said and seemed to be smiling.

“Let’s celebrate when you are in India,” She said enthusiastically.

“Sounds good!” He replied happily. “I have booked my tickets. I’ll be reaching early morning on Dec 22nd and I’ll be in India for 3 weeks. I was thinking, I can come to Pune as soon as I land. Then, I want you to go to Aurangabad with me. You can take time off around Christmas right?” He asked.

“I think so,” She replied, already looking forward to it. With all the US customers holidaying, work would be slow. She could go to Aurangabad and spend some time with Rakesh. “I’ll plan that way.” She should go to Aurangabad to spend some time with her would be in-laws too. She had been meaning to go over but had not managed in the last six months.

“We should also decide how long you are going to be in India and plan the date for the wedding,” Rakesh said.

“Yes,” Manasi agreed, but she was not sure about it. With the way things were at NDS, she would need to be here for a while. If her father didn’t recover in that time, she would also have to work with the board to figure out the right person who could take over from her.

When the call got over, she went and sat next to Akka and hugged her, “Good morning, Akka.”

“Hmmm. So when is our son-in-law coming over?”

Manasi told her and said, “I think he will be here for couple of days.”

Akka nodded, “We should get the study cleaned up. We can setup a bed there, like earlier.”

Manasi smiled and said, “Or he can just stay with me.”

She laughed when Akka reacted to this statement as she had expected. Then she got up, stretched and said, “Let me get ready. I have to meet Vikram Agashe.”

As she climbed the steps to her room, she thought about her father's condition again. She hoped her father would continue to make progress the way he had been making in the last few weeks. For the first three months after the stroke there was very little improvement. Then there were a few weeks where things seemed to be improving on daily basis; then again a spell of very little improvement. Last month had been wonderful; he was making progress and he seemed to be in a better mood. He seemed a lot more positive now and worked diligently on his physiotherapy exercises.

## CHAPTER TWO

From: Chris Jones  
To: Manasi Date; Niranjan Pagey  
Cc: Scott Williams  
Subject: Business update  
Date: Wed, 18 Nov 2015

*Hello Manasi and Niranjan,*

*We have successfully launched our latest product in the US and we would like to thank N. D. Software for their contribution in this. Please thank the team for all the hard work they have put in over the last couple of months. As a token of our appreciation, we are sending across ZipMake T-shirts for all the team members.*

*After this successful launch, we are bringing in some business changes at ZipMake. Scott and I would like to have a conference call with you to update you on these.*

*I hope we can talk Thursday evening 11:00 p.m. EST. If this does not suit you, please let us know a suitable time.*

*Best,  
Chris*

Manasi looked at the email and wondered if this meant bad news. Could “Business update” mean that they didn’t want to use NDS’s services anymore? ZipMake was an important account with a team of more than twenty members and a good billing rate. It would be a big loss to NDS if that business was going away.

She thought of calling Niranjan but changed her mind and walked over to his office instead. She knocked and he looked up from his laptop to give her a dead pan look. She entered and ignored to acknowledge his almost accusing stare. Sitting down across from his table she stated, “I wanted to talk to you about the ZipMake email.”

“11:00 p.m. Thursday EST would mean 9:30 a.m. Friday our time,” he said.

“Right,” She placed her elbows on the table and linked her fingers. “I wanted to understand the history of this account.”

“I had given you an overview when you came in,” Niranjan looked annoyed.

“Yes. But at that time we were going over all the accounts and I was more

focused on the current status and what we needed to do right away,” Manasi reminded patiently.

“We have had this account for five years! It is a big loss that they want to stop working with us.”

“Chris has not said they are going to stop working with us,” Manasi pointed out. “It could be something else, like maybe a bigger team. Or another product!” she was making an effort to be positive.

“The tone is very clear! It is not good news for sure!” Niranjan said sounding tense.

“When we started it was only a three people team right?” Manasi started asking about the history of the project.

They talked for some time and Niranjan continued to answer her questions in a stilted manner. But she got the required information. Chris and Scott were partners in the company. They had got funding two and half years back. Before then, the NDS team on this project was small – only three people. Scott was the techie, the architect that the N.D. Software team worked with.

Niranjan was handling this project for last year and half. According to him it always had delivery and quality problems, but Manasi had earlier heard another side of that from Devendra, the project manager. She realised that she needed to have another conversation with the project manager before the call. She wanted to go into the call as prepared as she could be. While she was telling Niranjan that the call might not mean bad news, she herself feared that it was!

As she was getting up, Niranjan said, “It could be due to the push back you insisted on. That long conversation you had with Scott about how we needed more time than estimated earlier to deliver better quality is where we made a mistake. At that time he might have appreciated your stand but I have been working with these customers for a long time. It’s best to just agree to them and then slowly ask for more time. We can always put more people on the team without telling them. I have done all that and ran these projects successfully for a long time.”

Manasi just could not bring herself to agree to that philosophy. But she didn’t have anything to say at this point. She hoped that talking to Vikram would help.

“Folks like you who have worked in the US in product companies think

they know everything. Running software projects in an Indian services company is very different. You just don't understand that!" Niranjan continued to harp.

"Maybe we are worrying unnecessarily. Hopefully the call is not bad news," Manasi said and walked out of Niranjan's office.

She talked to Vikram that afternoon. Vikram was in his early fifties and Manasi felt that he treated her like she was his niece. Best thing about Vikram was that he managed to stay calm even in challenging situations. He never panicked and he always helped others to calm down even under extreme stress.

He also shared information in a straight forward, matter of fact way with no biases.

"ZipMake is an ideal customer. Their contract terms are extremely fair and they never haggle over the rates. They also pay for the manager; that is something very rare. As for the payment, there is no outstanding and there has never been in the last five years," Vikram said pointing to the numbers on his laptop screen, then asked, "Do you want me to be there for the call?"

Manasi thought about that for a moment. "Ummm..." she shook her head, "Chris has asked only Niranjan and me. So I think it would be best that only two of us were in the call from our side. Can you be on-line on skype? I can let you know if we need you to come in."

Vikram then pointed out that Human Resources team might need to be involved. "I think it would be a good idea to talk to Chandrika about our fear of possible project closure. This would affect the project team directly but it would also have a demoralising effect on all others." Then he looked at Manasi and said, "Don't worry so much. Like you said, we might be worrying unnecessarily." He smiled and patted her on the shoulder, "And after all it is only one project. Even if it is our biggest project, we are not going to go out of business if it were to close. We would just need to struggle a little more and acquire other customers."

Chandrika the HR head was in her early forties but looked older. She had the typical elderly agony aunt look and demeanour. Manasi really disliked having to talk to her about any HR issues because Chandrika saw every small thing as a big problem. Chandrika felt the HR team was the only team who cared about people and were working on creating the right culture in the organization. It was even worse when the meeting involved both Chandrika

and Niranjan because the two just didn't see eye to eye. But Manasi had to call a meeting with both of them for ZipMake. As soon as Manasi said that they needed to talk about the ZipMake project, Chandrika said, "If you see the last month's people tracker, I had mentioned issues with three team members. I had also suggested that Devendra talk to all three of them separately."

"It's not about that," Niranjan told her disdainfully.

Manasi turned to Chandrika, "Devendra did talk to all three of them. I thought you knew that. But like Niranjan says, this is something else. We have received a mail from Chris Jones telling us that they are making some business changes. Our fear is that they might be ending the project with us. We don't know yet, but it is a possibility. As HR head, we wanted to keep you informed."

"I see," Chandrika said. "Good that you at least thought to inform me. I will have to take care of all the people if the project is closing."

"We will have to take care of the people," Manasi stressed the 'we' part. Then she said, "Do we have data of all the people who have worked on this project since the beginning? How long they have spent on the project, how many of them have been appreciated by ZipMake etc?"

"I'll have to look at all the old files," Chandrika said. "When do you need it?"

"We have a call on Friday morning, so by end of the day tomorrow?" Niranjan pitched in.

"Maybe I should be in the call," Chandrika said.

"Only Niranjan and I would be on the call since the mail is sent only to two of us," Manasi explained.

Chandrika always tried to get into meetings and calls where the GMs of the two business units were involved. Niranjan and Mayank Haral, the GM who headed the Indian business of NDS complained about her regarding this all the time. An issue, Manasi had not yet figured out how to handle. She had talked to Vikram about it and he had said that this had been an ongoing issue. In his opinion, it was not an urgent matter for Manasi to worry about.

She went home at a decent time that evening and for the next few evening as well. That meant she could have dinner with her mother and grandmother. She also spent time reading to her father. She had decided not to mention

anything about ZipMake to her father as yet. Why worry him till she knew more from the customer side?

On Friday morning, she was checking her mails around six in the morning and found Rakesh on-line on skype.

Rakesh: Hi Manasi, up early today?

Manasi: Hi You! Yes, checking my mails.

Manasi was really pleased to see him on-line. Any chance to have a quick chat was good...

Manasi: How was the birthday outing?

Rakesh: Went out with the gang. We had dinner at Chutneys. And then went for a movie at Galeria.

Manasi: Which movie did you watch? I would love to watch a movie in a movie hall one of these days.

She didn't remember the last movie she had watched in a movie hall.

Rakesh: What is stopping you? Sure, you are busy, but you can take out some time!

Manasi: Yes... Let's go when you are here!

Rakesh: Maybe. I am not sure about coming to Pune first. My mother wants me to go home first.

Manasi: Oh! So when will you come to Pune?

Rakesh: I don't know. Maybe all of us will come from Aurangabad for couple of days.

Manasi wanted for Rakesh and her to be able to be together by themselves. If he came down with his parents, all the time will go in doing things with either her family or his or both!



Manasi: I hope we can spend some time  
together by ourselves.

Rakesh: Right. How is work? Not as  
busy now?

Manasi: Not as busy, but there is a  
new tension. This long time  
customer has said there is  
business change on their  
side. Don't know what that  
means. Are they pulling the  
plug on our project?  
I am worried about that.

Rakesh: :-)

Manasi: Why the smile??

Rakesh: I ask a generic how are  
things question and you start  
telling me about major  
issues.

Manasi: But that is on my mind! What  
do you want me to do? Say  
everything is great, thanks for asking??

Rakesh: Don't get annoyed. But I  
can't help you with your  
problems.

But couldn't he at least listen to her?

Manasi: How can you, when you don't  
even want to hear them?

Rakesh: Sorry sweetie, I have to go.  
There is a stand-up meeting  
Right now.

The chat with Rakesh left Manasi feeling irritated and upset. Of course he couldn't help her. But he could listen couldn't he? She kept thinking about it as she got ready.

When she came down for breakfast, she checked her phone and found a message from Rakesh on whatsapp apologizing and telling her to cheer up. He said he was sure she would be able to figure it out; he had confidence in her. She smiled thinking fondly about Rakesh and greeted Akka cheerfully, "Good morning Akka!"

Niranjan and Manasi got into a meeting room ten minutes earlier and went over what all they can say if ZipMake talked about closing the project. They had planned it all out with Vikram. They would offer a discounted rate, they would offer a deferred payment, a smaller team, testing at no cost, documentation. They went over all of the points and discussed who should bring up which point. Finally right at the scheduled time, Manasi dialed the number to join the conference call.

“Hello this is Niranjan and Manasi,” Manasi opened.

“Hello Manasi, Hello Niranjan. This is Scott. Chris should be joining us any minute,” Scott said. Then he started talking about weather as they waited for Chris. They didn’t have to wait too long. He joined in couple of minutes and said, “Hello folks, sorry. I had to put my son to bed.”

After some preliminary conversation Chris went to the reason of the call. “First of all, let me say a big thank you to the complete team. Like I said we are very happy with the work. I would also like to thank you personally Manasi for the re-evaluation of the estimates. The updated estimates gave a more realistic view and helped us stay close to the plan.”

Manasi could not help looking at Niranjan when Chris said things to praise her. He looked at her with raised eyebrows as if he didn’t understand why she was looking at him. She just smiled and focused on the conversation again.

Chris then talked about how he and Scott had started the company and how they had got the funding and how at this point they had achieved what they had set out to achieve. “For ZipMake to go to the next level, we need different kind of backing, a different kind of platform. On Personal front, I am looking at doing something different. So because of these two reasons, we have been looking for the right kind of financier or a bigger company who would want to buy ZipMake out.

“We found what we were looking for in AccellaFab. It is a big company making software for the right segment. AccellaFab is a bigger name and can provide us the right platform to take our product line further. The deal is through and the announcement will go out on Monday.

“I will be moving out, but Scott will continue as the software architect on our product. Scott you want to talk about it?”

Scott took over. “Right, so as such nothing is changing for the team right away. We’ll continue to work on our product as per the roadmap I have

already shared. At some point, N. D. Software will need to sign a contract with AccellaFab.”

Manasi looked at Niranjan. Both of them had heard about AccellaFab. It was a software company founded seven years ago by an Indian, Jay Randive. It focused on manufacturing industry and had done extremely well. Manasi had heard that Jay Randive was known to be ruthless in business. She also knew that he lacked sophistication and polish; that he was insensitive and crass. Manasi’s heart sank thinking that ZipMake, one of their best customers was now part of his empire.

“Thanks for telling us before it gets into the news,” Manasi said. “We can share accurate information with the team. Let us know if there is anything you would like us to do from our side for a smooth transition.”

Then Niranjan chipped in, “It has been great working with you Scott and I am glad the team will continue to work with you even in the new setup.”

“Yes, well, I am happy to have the same team,” Scott said pleasantly. “As such there is no transition, our product team continues as is,” he explained. “But we are rescheduling my trip. Instead of February, now I would be coming over at end of this month or early December.”

End of November? Around Thanks Giving? In Manasi’s experience, that was quite unusual.

“Oh? Rather unusual time for you to travel isn’t it?” Manasi commented and Niranjan gave her a look.

Scott laughed a little and said, “Yes. It is. But I am taking a vacation for Thanks Giving starting Monday, and will be traveling to Vietnam. So right after that I’ll come over.”

“You’ll need a visa,” Manasi said thinking back to a customer who had not realised that and had to postpone his visit at the last moment since he had not applied for a visa.

“Yes, have got the visa,” Scott confirmed before stating, “Jay is going to be in India at that time and both of us would come over for a visit. We’ll confirm the dates.”

“OK,” Manasi said. Then as an afterthought she said, “Great! We’ll look forward to the visit.”

Manasi wasn’t really looking forward to a customer visit in that time frame. She had to start focusing on the Indian customers, which she was

hoping to start doing when US customers' business would be slow from Thanks Giving to the New Year. She also wanted to take time off when Rakesh was in India. Now this visit...

They closed the call wishing Scott and Chris for upcoming Thanks Giving. When the call got over, Niranjana smiled a happy smile, something that Manasi was seeing for the first time, and said, "We were worried for nothing! This is actually good news. AccellaFab is a much bigger company. We get an entry into that company as a 20 people project. Hopefully we'll get more work from them going forward."

"Yes, let's hope for the best," Manasi said giving him a genuine smile. She was very happy. For one the news was not bad as they had imagined. Secondly, Niranjana was happy about something. She hoped it will continue. She needed support from him. The last six months had been really difficult!

"Let's talk to Vikram right away. We can all relax and go out for lunch," Niranjana said getting up.

"Let's also include Chandrika," Manasi said picking up her notepad and laptop.

Niranjana looked to the door and back at Manasi, "I don't know why we want to include her. It's a business thing, nothing to do with HR." But he was in a good mood and seemed willing to make concessions, "But if you want to include her, let's."

Vikram was surprised to see Manasi and Niranjana going to see him together. Furthermore, both of them looked in a good mood. They told him the good news and suggested lunch. He agreed whole heartedly.

Manasi and Niranjana explained about the visit over lunch and Vikram said, "We need to prepare well. Scott is coming for the first time and he would want to spend time with the team. With the new CEO also coming over, we should plan good set of presentations from all of us."

The lunch was enjoyable, everyone was relaxed and for the first time Manasi felt that all of them were on the same page regarding NDS.

Back in her office, she ran search for AccellaFab as well as Jay Randive. The company was seven years old and Jay Randive was one of the three founders. It made range of software products for the Manufacturing Industry and was doing extremely well. It had got funding from major venture capital

firms early on and had gone public last year. Its current market capitalisation was around 3.4 billion. Though there were three founders, Jay was said to be the brain behind the early products. The other two being silent partners.

Manasi knew a little about Jay, he was talked about in the Indian community in the greater Seattle area where she had lived for five years when she worked for Microsoft. He was someone who had done exceptionally well. After working for Microsoft for around eight years he had started on his own and had got backing from Microsoft. He was rich and he was unmarried. Manasi had heard some conversations insinuating that he was gay. But no one believed that really. She had heard from a girl he had dated and she vehemently denied his being gay. It was also known that he dated quite a few women, most of them Non-Indian. The only times he went to Indian community functions were when Indian bigwigs were visiting.

When she ran a search on him, she got to know that he was an IIT Mumbai Alumni. He had joined Microsoft as a campus hire. While working at Microsoft, he had done executive MBA from Wharton.

She looked at the photograph on the Wikipedia and thought that he looked almost a gentleman in the photograph. But she knew very well, he was not what he appeared.

She got home around six, a lot earlier than what had become the norm for her. Akka saw her come in from the main door and said, “Anu, which direction did the Sun rise from today? How come this girl has come home now?”

Manasi smiled, “I decided that you can do with my company for your evening coffee, Akka!” She went to sit next to Akka on the sofa and put her head on Akka’s shoulder.

Anu came from the kitchen and said, “Daddy is awake, why don’t you go talk to him?”

Manasi wanted to relax for a while. Talking to her father didn’t do that. Of course, lying in the bed he couldn’t be angry and scold like he used to. She didn’t worry now about annoying him all the time like she used to either. But still, talking to him was not her idea of relaxing.

But she didn’t want to say any of this to her mother. So she said, “I’ll say hello,” and walked over to her father’s room.

“Hello Daddy,” She said and sat in the chair next to him.

He said, “Hello,” which sounded like “Ho” to Manasi. Then he pointed to the writing pad on his side table with his left hand. Manasi got up and got that along with the pen. She opened the notepad on a blank page and gave him the pen. With effort he wrote ‘home early?’ with his left hand.

“Yes,” she smiled. “After a very long time.”

He nodded and then wrote, ‘All OK?’

“Oh yes, Daddy,” Manasi said and then she updated him about ZipMake. How they had been worried but how it was nothing to worry about and how AccellaFab had taken over ZipMake. Then she talked about the visit.

‘Who?’ he wrote.

“Scott and CEO of AccellaFab, Jay Randive,” Manasi told him.

Her father got a crease on his forehead and he shook his head. Then he wrote ‘Shark!!’ in big letters.

“Jay Randive you mean?” Manasi asked.

Her father nodded.

“Do you know him?”

Her father shook his head to indicate that he didn’t and she said, “I have heard he is quite ruthless in business. But we are not his competitor, we only provide software development services for one of his new product lines now. To AccellaFab we are only a vendor.

“Also, they don’t make software to suit Indian manufacturing, so we don’t need to worry about our Indian business either. The risk of our other customers closing their work if they are driven out of business by AccellaFab was always there.

“If we do our work well, we don’t have anything to worry, I think.”

Her father looked at her for a long moment and then wrote, ‘Careful!’

Manasi nodded but she couldn’t figure out how Jay Randive could be dangerous to NDS. The worst case scenarios would be losing the 20 people project.

That evening, she logged in on time to have a video call with Rakesh. He wasn’t online and so she waited. Finally when she was about to give up, she saw Rakesh log in.

Rakesh: Hi Manasi!

Manasi: Hi! I have been waiting for  
half hour...

Rakesh: Got up late and I didn't  
remember right away. Then I  
wondered if you are going to  
be here at all...

Manasi: Oh... But I wanted to make sure  
I was here on time today.

Rakesh: Good. I am glad.

Why were they chatting? Why wasn't he accepting her video call?

Manasi: Accept my video call.

Rakesh: Can't. Vicky is here and I  
would rather not have a video  
call with you with my  
roommate hearing our  
conversation.

Manasi: :-(

Rakesh: Cheer up! I am coming over  
in a month! And I will come  
to Pune first, like I had  
planned.

Manasi: Really?

So he had managed to convince his mother! Good!

Rakesh: I want you to come to  
Aurangabad with me on 24<sup>th</sup>  
Dec and stay as long as you  
can.

Manasi: We have a customer visit in  
the first week of December.  
But end of Dec should be  
possible. BTW, guess who our  
new customer is? AccellaFab!

Rakesh: Can we just talk about us for  
once? I don't want to talk  
about your software company  
and its customers!

Manasi: OK...

Manasi was taken aback. She was also angry. But she didn't want to fight

with him. It took her a few moments to calm herself down and think of the right thing to say.

Manasi: So how is the weather there?  
Getting cold now?

Rakesh: Yes. And it has been raining  
for days! I am so looking  
forward to the India trip!

Manasi: I miss Puget Sound...

Rakesh: So come over for a visit when  
I come back. We should anyway  
decide our plan. I would like  
for us to get married soon  
and for you to come back.

Manasi: Let's talk when you are in  
India.

The conversation with Rakesh again left her feeling uneasy and restless. Rakesh was probably right to want to talk about themselves, but NDS was so much part of her life right now that it was difficult for her to talk about herself without bringing in NDS. He wanted them to get married and he also wanted her to go back to US with him. How could she leave NDS right now?



## CHAPTER THREE

Anupama got up at six and made tea for all, just like she did every day. Then she went over to check on Upendra. He was still sleeping. That was good, since he had not been able to sleep easily the previous night. He would close eyes and open them again in just a few moments. He then rubbed his forehead with his hand. He had not said anything but he had seemed restless.

Like every day, she had taken his dinner to him at exactly 8:00 p.m. and helped him with it as he struggled eating with his left hand. Later on, she had sat and watched the late night news with him. But even with the sleep medication, at 11 he was wide awake. She had sat chatting for some time and then he had said she should go and sleep, that he would be OK. She had gone to her room around midnight.

Manasi came home past ten or even later on many evenings. Though Upendra tried to stay up till she came home, many times he could not fight sleep after taking the sleep medication. So what had kept him up last night? Was it something that had happened at NDS? Anupama decided to talk to Manasi.

She sighed as she arranged the things on Upendra's side table and looked at his face once again. She thought about how things had changed since the day Upendra collapsed. Upendra's stroke had presented a big challenge. When he came home after being in the hospital for ten days, first few days were horrible. He was frustrated with his condition and angry all the time. He was also worried about his manufacturing unit as well as NDS, the software company. Anupama could also feel his fear. Then about three weeks after he was home, when third nurse had walked out on him, Anupama sat next to him and talked to him sternly. She lectured him like he was a small child who needed to be disciplined.

"Upendra, you had a stroke and are now bed ridden with one side rendered useless. Yes, it is a terrible condition to be in. But it is not anyone's fault! Definitely not that of nurses'! If you continue to take your frustrations out on the nurses, the nursing bureau will not want to send any new nurse to us. I am not trained to take care of you by myself in your present condition. You need a nurse to look after you!

"I know your life changed terribly all of a sudden and you are suffering, but it is difficult for all of us! Akka is worried about you and it troubles her

when you are so angry. I am here every day by your side to take care of you in every way I can. Manasi is leaving a job she loves, changing her plans of getting married to come here and run NDS!

“But you will get well only if you focus on getting better. If you keep feeling sorry for yourself and keep taking out your anger, frustration on others, you will drive all of us away. It will not help you get better!

“On the other hand if you don’t want to get better, go ahead and continue as you are doing. I’ll also stop trying to help you.”

Right after the ‘lecture’ he closed his eyes and would not look at Anupama even when she called. But his behaviour changed after that. He treated the nurses with respect. He listened to them, took the medicines when he was asked to and ate without fuss.

Anupama spent good part of her day with him. She read out the newspaper to him in the morning. She got him books from the library. He could read little on his own but she read out to him. She got playing cards and played simple card games with him. She was there when the physiotherapist came and went through the daily routine with Upendra.

Right from the first day he came home, it was Anupama who had decided who will visit him and for how long. She kept out a lot of people who had called to check when it was alright to visit and even some who had just turned up at the house. She kept out those that she knew annoyed Upendra. She also kept out those that she didn’t want him to see.

But she didn’t stop Dr. Shama, who everyone knew was Upendra’s close ‘friend’ for couple of years. Dr. Shama came to the hospital the first day and sat with Upendra for an hour. Then she came once more after about a week. When Upendra came home, she came once a week for about a month and the frequency decreased further in later months. She had not visited at all in the last couple of months. Upendra too had not asked about her.

The day Upendra suffered the stroke, in the evening he was to go out of station for three days. He had said it was for business meetings, but Anupama believed he was going away with Dr. Shama. She hadn’t mentioned anything to Upendra; just like many outstation business trips over the years.

She had been heart-broken when she first had realised that he was having an affair. She had known it was with his secretary, who had left the company when the affair was over. It had been around the time of her second

miscarriage. That hurt even more. But she hadn't said anything then or later on, though she knew about at least three other affairs.

She never confronted him and she never treated those women any differently than others she met as his wife. She took care of home and her daughters. She went out with him when he asked her to go. If he was going alone, she didn't question him. She had come to terms with her life and accepted that if she wanted any kind of happiness for her children and peace for herself, it was best to let Upendra do what he wanted the way he wanted it; not argue, not question him and not have strong opinions of her own.

He had proposed marriage to her when she had just completed her graduation and she had been flattered. Her parents had been very pleased since Upendra was a young entrepreneur who was doing very well. He was one of the Pune's most eligible bachelors. At 29, he had been eight years older than her but it had not mattered at the time.

Anupama had married him with a lot of dreams of what her new life was going to be like. And to be fair, first couple of years had been good. He had taken her to different places and often brought her gifts, sarees, jewellery and sometimes music tapes. She had learnt music and he didn't mind her continuing that. But he didn't want her singing on any public platforms. He had said, "Upendra Date's wife will not be singing to an audience!"

She had tried to argue and pointed out that the first time he had seen her was on the stage, singing. And hadn't he said that he had liked her singing? But he had got really angry at that and that anger had scared her. He had said that it was fine for her to sing in her college when she was a student there, but as Upendra Date's wife she will not sing in front of people at any cost and that was final!

Upendra had very specific ideas about what was OK and what was not, especially for his wife. If anything she said or did was not in line with his ideas of appropriateness, he got really angry and made sure that she understood that she must toe his line no matter what! Slowly, she stopped voicing her ideas and thoughts, quietly doing what he asked; what he wanted.

Upendra's father had died in an accident when Upendra was eight year old. From that time onwards, it had been only Akka and him till he went to IIT for his engineering. Akka had lived alone in Konkan in a small town near Chiplun from the time he went to IIT. She finally came to live with Upendra and Anupama after Anupama's second miscarriage.

First few days after Akka came to live with them, Anupama had tried to do a few things that she had wanted to but had not dared to mention to Upendra. But Akka's presence didn't make a difference. Upendra was still dictatorial. The only difference was that earlier he used to get angry only with Anu. Now he would also get angry with Akka. Anupama saw Akka suffer his anger a few times and quietly went back to toeing his line.

Till the day of the stroke, he had told her directly or indirectly what to do, what not to do. After that Friday, he was completely in her care. First few days after the stroke went in being too worried about him. But once he was on the path to recovery, Anupama started going out. She started doing things she wanted to. She also spent a lot of time with Upendra. For the past three months she was very happy. She got to spend a lot of time with Upendra. He was not angry all the time now. Moreover, he was happy to have her company and after a very long time he was all hers!

At 8:00 a.m. Anupama climbed the stairs to Manasi's room. Manasi kept the door open at night so that if someone called from below, she could hear. But sometimes she slept so deep that Anupama had to call her multiple times even standing right next to her!

She looked at Manasi sleeping on her side with her left hand tucked under her cheek and she felt an urge to hold her like a baby again. Where had all the years gone? It seemed like just yesterday when Manasi was a small baby. Now, her baby was thrown into an ocean and she was struggling hard to manage the huge responsibility that was thrust upon her.

Was Manasi paying too high a price? Should she relieve Manasi from the burden? Should she tell her that it was time to look for someone else to run the software company? Talk to the board? It had been Anupama's idea to put Manasi in charge, primarily because she didn't trust Niranjana. But it was clear now that Anupama as well as the board had underestimated the problems that Manasi would have to handle.

Manasi was twenty eight years old. Anupama couldn't help think about herself at that age. She had been married for over six years and was a mother of two. Manasi would have gotten married in October if she had not had to change her plans.

Leaving a job she loved, putting her marriage plans on hold and coming back to India to take on a challenge like running a business that she knew nothing about, Manasi had done all of those without complaining. She had

shown maturity way beyond her years in her decisions and was now handling a responsibility that one would be expected to handle much later in life.

“Manu?” Anupama said softly.

“Umm?” Manasi replied and Anupama sat next to her with a smile.

“It’s eight. You wanted to get up right?” Anupama said softly running her fingers through Manasi’s hair.

Manasi opened her eyes and looked at Anupama. Then she smiled softly, “Good morning, Mamma!” But then she closed her eyes again.

“Manu”, Anupama called again.

“I am awake,” Manasi assured her. Then she sighed and sat up.

“Do you have a meeting with Vikram Agashe?” Anupama asked. Manasi met Vikram on Saturdays since she didn’t have enough time to go through all the details during the week. NDS was fortunate to have Vikram handling the company’s finances but Manasi had to learn and know the details.

“Not today” Manasi said. “But I am going to call Abhijit Kaka today.”

Abhijit Deodhar was Upendra’s cousin who had run NDS for Upendra right from the start. But like others he too had differences working with Upendra. Three years ago, Upendra ended up saying nasty things to Abhijit and Abhijit finally decided to quit. Upendra could have stopped him, but his ego came in the way. With his expertise in the field of software development, Abhijit got a very good opportunity in Australia and he migrated there with his family.

Abhijit had been the first person that Anupama as well as the NDS board had thought of when Upendra collapsed. But now that he was settled there and his children were doing well in the school, he didn’t want to relocate back to India. He agreed to help remotely. Manasi had been talking to him regularly and found his inputs and advice useful.

“When are you talking to him? On phone or on your laptop?” Anupama asked.

“In the afternoon,” Manasi said getting off the bed and Anupama got up.

“So you are here for lunch?” she asked her daughter.

“Do you want to go out for lunch Mamma?” Manasi asked.

“No, not today. I am preparing some special dishes for Daddy today,” Anupama said. “Also, Deshpande Kaka will be coming over late afternoon. I

need to be with daddy when he is giving an update on the factory so that I can tell him whatever daddy says.”

It had been a while since Manasi had gone out just for fun. She had friends in Pune but with so much on her plate, she had not got a chance to go out with them.

“Manu, why don’t you go with your friends? Or do you want to call them home someday?” Anupama asked. She felt better when Manasi brightened at the suggestion. “Oh and Rashmi Saxena had called yesterday. I gave her your cell phone number. She said she will call today. I think she wanted to invite you for her wedding.”

“When is the wedding?” Manasi asked.

“In December sometime.”

“Rakesh will come over to Pune on 22<sup>nd</sup>. I hope it is not after that. He wants me to go to Aurangabad with him on 24<sup>th</sup>.”

Anupama nodded. Manasi was fortunate to have found someone like Rakesh. He had been supportive when Manasi decided to quit her job in the US and come over to take care of NDS. Manasi should spend time with him when he was in India. In last six months she had not gone to Aurangabad even once. It was only fair of her would be in-laws to expect that she go over when Rakesh was in India. But Rashmi’s father was a customer of N. D. Enterprises for years. Date’s manufacturing unit provided filters and spark plugs to Saxena’s company. So it would be important to make sure someone from Date household attended the wedding.

“Talk to Rashmi today. She is your friend but her father is also our customer,” Anupama said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was a typical grey and rainy December morning in Puget Sound when Jay drove his Lexus into the underground parking of AccellaFab’s headquarters. He climbed the four flights of stairs easily and made his way to his office on the other side of the building. It was barely eight and he was surprised to find that the floor was not completely empty as he had expected

it to be. He nodded to the three engineers who wished him as he passed their work stations and wished them in return. He must find out who the three were, he made a note to himself.

He thought back to his early days in Microsoft. How acknowledgement about his hard work from his lead had meant a lot to him. How it had been a reward in itself and a great motivation to continue working hard. The three engineers who were here before eight needed to know that he had noticed them and that he appreciated their dedication.

On reaching his office, he opened the venetian blinds, then shook his head at the greyness outside and switched on the lights. He put his laptop bag on the side table, pulled out his laptop and placed it on the big desk. He checked the Rolex on his wrist and realised he had time; Chris Jones was going to call him at 11:30 a.m., his time.

Acquiring ZipMake had been an excellent move. It had two fold benefits for AccellaFab. Firstly, its software product for the American market, targeting the suppliers of the big vehicle manufacturers was a good addition to AccellaFab's product line. Secondly, and to Jay, more importantly, they already worked with the Indian software company that Jay wanted to acquire.

Jay had always wanted to be in manufacturing. At IIT, he had chosen to study mechanical engineering. All his projects till the third year had been in the manufacturing industry. But after understanding different aspects of manufacturing and the high percentage of component rejects based on quality, he had taken up a software project to create an application to track the quality of the filters and plugs being produced by his friend's father. It had become a very successful project at IIT and everyone had been talking about it for a while.

When Microsoft came to recruit at IIT, they were looking at student of only the Computer Science branch. There were only three other students they had agreed to look at, from branches other than Computer science, based on the software projects they had done. Jay was one of them and the only one that they finally made a job offer to.

Accepting the job offer from Microsoft had been a big decision for Jay. He would end up working in a completely different field than the one he had chosen to study. But it seemed like an opportunity of a lifetime and he could not bring himself to decline.

Today he was glad that he had accepted the Microsoft offer. He had had to

struggle a lot but it had been a great journey of learning. It had given him a lot more than a great working experience. He had learnt about life and people and success.

Seven years ago, he had finally decided to leave Microsoft to start a company that would focus on making software for manufacturing industry. Through his contacts at Microsoft, he had managed to get two people to invest in his idea. Two of them had been silent partners in AccellaFab till it went public.

Getting into the Indian manufacturing market had been on Jay's agenda for a long time. Manufacturing was big in India. And, he could see that more and more manufacturing was going to move to Asia. India was a good starting point for the overall Asian market. Also, he felt at home in India.

Another reason Jay wanted to setup a software company in India was that somewhere, after all the success he had enjoyed in his career, he still felt a need to prove himself in his motherland.

Ties to one's roots were strange. He still thought of India as his country, even though he was now an American citizen. Will this newly acquired country ever become as much his own as India always had been?

After AccellaFab went public, he had started thinking about making products for Indian market. But he realised that he didn't know the present Indian manufacturing market at all. He had worked in a manufacturing unit during his vacations when he was studying at IIT Powai, but it was a long time ago and his exposure was only to a few processes; only in a company making filters & plugs. To make software products for India, he will need to bring in someone who understood that space well. Or he could acquire a software company in India that was working with Indian manufacturers.

Pune was a big manufacturing hub, specifically for the auto manufacturing industry. It also had a good presence of software companies and it was close to Mumbai. He couldn't think of a better place than Pune to setup his Indian facility. With that thought in mind, he had hired someone in India to research the software companies in Pune who worked with the auto manufacturers in India. He had narrowed down the list to three and had paid an investigation firm to find out all they could about the three companies. After a lot of deliberation, he had zeroed in on NDS.

Upendra Date's software firm was working with auto manufacturers in India, but they were also working with some American software product



companies that were making software for American manufacturers. Abhijit Deodhar, Upendra's cousin who had been in charge of the company from its conception had left few years ago. Since then, Upendra was running it himself.

Jay had decided that he would buy Upendra out. If Upendra didn't agree to that, Jay planned to hire talent from NDS. He would setup AccellaFab's development centre in Pune and would make NDS the target of his recruitment team. He could afford to pay higher salaries and many fancy things that a typical Indian company of the size of NDS could not afford.

Jay had asked the investigator to find out more about Upendra. What was he like? What drove him? What were his strengths and more importantly his weaknesses? A month later the investigator had submitted his full report. Upendra was a successful entrepreneur, a self-made man. But he was egoistic and arrogant. He had two daughters. The elder one, Manasi, had done her MS from UCLA and was working for Microsoft. The younger one, Rachana, was in Paris studying French literature. It was believed that his daughters didn't get along with him. Upendra Date had had multiple extra marital affairs and his wife was either unaware of those or resigned to them. The investigator could not find out much about his wife, Anupama.

The report on Upendra helped Jay finalise his target. Knowing the details meant that even if it became a hostile takeover, Jay would not have any qualms.

Out of curiosity, he had asked his contacts in Microsoft about Manasi Date. She was working as a lead programmer and doing very well. His contact had also informed him that she played tennis and that she was engaged to be married. Jay was tempted to go and meet her. He had wondered if it would help to get to know her. But he had then decided against it.

He came out of his musings when his cell phone started ringing. He checked the time just as he reached out to pick up the phone from the table. It wasn't 8:30 yet. He then looked at the name flashing on the phone's screen and sighed.

"Good morning, Bindu" he said.

"Good morning!" Bindu sounded her energetic self. "You are coming over for dinner tonight. No excuses," She informed him.

He couldn't help smile, "I have a flight to catch tomorrow morning."

“I know! But only at 9:30, right? If you like, I’ll drive you to the airport,” she insisted.

“OK,” he caved in. “I’ll come over around seven thirty. Do you need me to get anything?”

“Just yourself!”

Jay was still smiling when he disconnected.

At exactly 8:30 a.m., the phone on his desk started ringing and he picked up on the third ring.

“Good morning Jaai,” Chris Jones said. When Jay had come to the US fifteen years ago, he had used his full first name, Dhananjay. Till he came to the US, he had not considered his name to be difficult to pronounce. But in his first year at Microsoft, he had seen umpteen people struggle to remember it and say it correctly. It was Bindu, who had suggested that he shorten it in use.

“Good morning Chris,” Jay replied. After spending less than half a minute on inquiring after each other’s wellbeing, they got down to discussing business.

“I am sending you the report with the sales figures for the last month. If you have any questions, let me know.” Chris said.

“The report will cover US as well as China figures I hope.”

“Yes. I am also sending you the marketing deck. Has Scott sent the updated product plan?”

“Yes. He has. I have a couple of questions but I’ll talk to him in India. Scott is reaching Pune on 3rd afternoon as planned?” Jay asked.

“Yes. Has he sent you the schedule for the meetings at NDS? Or do you want me to mail it out to you?”

“No, I have not got the schedule. Please send it. I had asked Scott to schedule a meeting separately with the CEO, outside of the team meetings and presentations. I hope that is in the schedule.”

“Let me check. By the way, I have just emailed it to you, so if you want to check it...” Chris said.

Jay turned to the laptop and checked his email. Chris’s mail was on top and he opened the attachment. He was trying to comprehend the schedule when Chris said, “Well, there is no meeting only with the CEO. But there is a slot

at 4:00 p.m. with the CEO and the director of the business unit our project comes under.”

Jay was looking at the spread sheet and he was not sure why it said ‘Manasi Date’ in it. It also didn’t seem like a mistake since it was appearing in multiple places. He finally mentioned it, “I see it says Manasi Date here.”

“She is the CEO. Well, actually you can call her the acting CEO. Her father has been unwell and she has stepped in.”

“I see”, Jay said. When had that happened? Sometime in the last seven months, he guessed. He was displeased to hear that but with effort he focused on what Chris was saying.

“Yes, but at least for our project, it has been a good change. She has made things more streamlined and predictable.”

Jay went over the complete schedule with Chris. Then they talked about couple of points about the closure of their deal and ended the call.

Manasi was running the place! Was this going to be a spoke in the wheel? He should ask the investigator to start gathering information about the heads of the two other companies that he had shortlisted earlier. With Upendra at the helm, Jay had no qualms about being ruthless. He could take over the company or hire away their best talent to setup his own. Either way, he would get what he wanted without much struggle. But if Upendra was unwell and his daughter had stepped in; daughter who had stayed away from it so far, then Jay might need to rethink his plan.

He was still thinking about it when there was a knock on the door. Christine, his admin assistant was standing at the door. Christine was efficient and no nonsense. She had worked with Jay for over five years now and knew his priorities very well. He gestured for her to come in.

“Good morning, Jai”, she said rolling his name on her tongue.

“Morning. What have you got there?” He asked.

Christine guessed correctly that he was not in a very good mood. So she didn’t indulge in any talk about the weather or the traffic that she normally used as an opener. “I need your signatures on these.” She said putting an open folder in front of him. He read the documents and signed them. Then he looked at her and she said, “Dave has asked for a meeting. He says it is urgent.”

“Can you schedule half an hour around 3:30 p.m.?” He was not sure what

his calendar looked like, but Christine should be able to handle it.

“Sure thing!” She said

She walked to the door but then turned around and said, “I am on vacation from 22nd. And I am back only in the New Year. Remember? So if you need me to book your return, you will have to inform me before 20th.”

“It will be in the new year,” Jay said.

“I know you are going for indefinite time, but I assumed it would not be more than three weeks. How long are you going to be gone, boss?” She looked worried.

“Not sure right now. It could be for a while. Could be couple of months,” He didn’t know how things will span out and there were multiple things he needed to take care of this time. Though NDS was on his priority list, his mother’s illness was worrying him the most.

Christine had almost closed the door when Jay called out, “Christine? Danny should be here by 9:30. Let him come in whenever he gets here and then hold all my calls till my meeting with him is over.”

She hesitated and then said, “Your 11:30 a.m. is confirmed.”

“OK. We should be done by then.”

Danny, Daniel Thacher was his right hand man. In Jay’s absence, Danny will have to run the show. Danny had worked with him from the start and Jay was confident about him. It also was the time of the year when work was slow and a lot of people were going to be taking time off. But Danny had asked for Jay’s time and today’s meeting was to go over priorities together.

For the first time, Jay would not be present for AccellaFab’s holiday party and Danny would have to host that. Jay was amused to know that Danny was more worried about the party than anything else.

Through the day, Jay found himself thinking about the change of leadership at NDS from time to time. Of course, it was only a minor irritant and by the time he left for the day around six in the evening, it didn’t bother him at all. He had cheered up thinking that, in fact, having an inexperienced person at the helm, would only make taking control of the company easier. In fact, he could ‘guide’ her in her time of need, without letting on that he was lining up for an easy take over. Of course, he would need to gain her trust for that. So, his first priority should be to get Manasi to see him as straight

forward and trust worthy.

Jay called Bindu when he reached home and checked once again if she needed him to get anything. He quickly completed his packing and left cash on the table with a note for Janet, his cleaning lady. Then he showered and changed. At the last minute, he decided to take his BMW Roadster instead of the Lexus; he would not be able to drive it for at least a few months after tonight.

Drive from his house on Sahali way in Redmond to Bindu's was less than ten minutes. When Bindu opened her front door, she found a cheerful Jay standing on her doorstep with an expensive bottle of wine in his hand.

## CHAPTER FIVE

On Friday, when Manasi arrived at 8:30 a.m. dressed in her formal best, there was a distinct air of ‘customer visit’ to NDS. The security personnel seemed more alert, there was a welcome board with names of the guests at the reception and the receptionist was already in her place, dressed in a light blue saree.

This was not the first customer visit that Manasi was facing; in last six months three customer visits had taken place and she had never felt uneasy or nervous. Today was different though. AccellaFab was a big name and furthermore the CEO himself was visiting!

Vikram, Niranjana and Manasi had discussed Jay’s visit time and again, thinking about it from various angles. Why was the CEO himself coming to visit them was a question that had been bothering them. After a lot of consideration, they had decided that it was most likely because he wanted to see how they worked, to decide whether they could handle other, bigger AccellaFab projects or not. They had then debated about what information to present to him, in what format and who should be the one to present it, so as to make a favourable impression about NDS.

It had not helped that Niranjana and Chandrika had ended up arguing on various points and Vikram had seemed rather aloof. But after multiple meetings and exchanging ideas on email, they had their presentation sequence all ready. They had a tight schedule in place for the day, from nine in the morning when Jay and Scott would be arriving at NDS. Considering that it was Scott’s first visit to India and Jay’s importance they had set aside an hour in between for lunch at a nearby restaurant. Manasi hoped that the meetings will go as per the schedule. Of all the days, Rashmi Saxena’s sangeet and cocktail party was the same evening!

By quarter to nine, Niranjana, Vikram and Chandrika had arrived. Vikram was always well dressed, but today he looked a lot more formal and wore black shoes. Chandrika in a crisp, grey salwar suit was a lot better dressed than usual. Niranjana was dressed like he was dressed every day. He wore dark brown trousers and beige coloured bush shirt. He never wore formal shoes and today was no exception; he was in sandals. But this was not a new issue. Manasi had talked to Vikram about this earlier and was told that ‘Niranjana is like that. But we ignore it looking at his capability and his

importance'. Manasi had wondered how her father, who was a stickler for formalities had allowed it.

Ten minutes before nine, Vikram went down to the ground floor to wait for their guests at the entry gate and others made their way to the board room. Vikram brought their guests to the board room on time and made the formal introductions. "Please meet Manasi Date, our CEO. She stepped in about six months back when Upendra Date, the founder suffered a stroke." Manasi walked around the table to shake hands with both of them.

"Hi Manasi," Scott said with a big smile. She had talked to Scott on phone multiple times and exchanged emails; there was an easy rapport with him. Then she turned to Jay, who extended his hand and said "Hello" very warmly. He surprised her completely by smiling as if he knew her. She had attended couple of functions in Seattle where he too was present, but they weren't ever introduced.

Vikram introduced the other two and the guests were then offered refreshments while Niranjana setup the laptop for a presentation.

Manasi gave an overview of the company and then Niranjana made a presentation on the ZipMake project that had grown from a small, three people team to a twenty people strong team. He talked about challenges they had faced and how they had handled those and about the great understanding between NDS and ZipMake.

Scott made it a point to talk about how the predictability as well as the quality of the deliverables had improved in the last few months. Then he turned to Manasi and said, "I would like to thank you for that."

Manasi felt a little awkward at that, more so when Jay looked pleased and smiled at her. "Actually we should thank the project manager and the development lead. They were the ones who made it possible." She said.

"Yes, that is right," Niranjana said. "I worked closely with the project manager to ensure he implemented all the changes in the process." Then he probably realised that it sounded like he was trying to prove he also had played a role in the change and said, "We can talk about it when we meet with the team."

Everyone turned to look at Jay when he said, "Can we change the sequence of the sessions? Bring in the team post lunch? Cover your HR & Ops after this session?"

Even Scott looked a little taken aback but his expression cleared quickly. Manasi looked at Vikram and Chandrika; Vikram nodded and Manasi said, “Sure. We’ll have a tea break and then cover those two before lunch.”

Jay nodded and then leaning to Scott on his left, said something softly. Scott nodded to him and said, “Yes. No problem.”

After a short break, Chandrika started her presentation on HR. She talked about the two parts of it - Talent Acquisition and Talent Management. When she was talking about the recruitment, Jay interrupted on one slide to ask, “How does your acceptance ratio compare with other companies of this size?”

“We have a very stringent process for recruitment. So out of about 100 that apply, I think we end up offering to about 5 to 7,” Chandrika said.

“And how many accept the offer and actually join NDS?” Jay asked.

At this question, Chandrika looked at Manasi as if she expected the answer to come from Manasi. Manasi had no clue about this. She had not looked into the HR matters at all so far. So she looked at Vikram, who looked equally blank. “Have we tracked how many offers have been accepted by month?” Manasi asked Chandrika.

“I can’t give you the numbers offhand but I should be able to get that,” Chandrika said sounding perturbed.

“That will be nice,” Jay said and smiled briefly.

Ahead in the presentation, Jay asked questions on multiple points that Chandrika didn’t have ready answers for; what was the annualized percentage of attrition, how did it compare with the industry, what was the percentage of people at different levels in the company, what was the criteria for promotion and so on.

At the end of Chandrika’s presentation, Manasi was feeling quite embarrassed because they had not been able to answer many of the questions and they came out looking very unprofessional. Chandrika looked positively upset and Niranjana was shaking his head. Vikram didn’t seem to have suffered any embarrassment though.

Manasi looked at Chandrika and gave a smile to make her feel a little better and said, “Let us go over all the points we have noted down from the presentation this afternoon.” She will stay for the first part of the team meeting and then when Scott starts talking about specific modules, she will



step out from that meeting and will work with Chandrika, Manasi decided planning her afternoon. Will she be able to leave by 5:30 as she had hoped to?

Jay also asked multiple questions in Vikram's presentation about operations and Manasi started feeling uneasy. Why was he asking all these questions about HR and operations in such details and specifics? Why weren't they focusing on the ZipMake project? Their record on ZipMake project was very good in terms of retention as well as progress of the people to higher levels. Was he looking at working with them at such a large scale that all these things at organizational level would matter to him?

They all walked across to the restaurant for lunch where the food was pre-ordered. Scott made them all very happy by telling them that he loved Indian food. The conversation on the lunch table was kept light and away from work. The conversation fort was held by Scott and Vikram; others talked a lot less than these two. Jay was mostly quiet except when someone asked something to him directly. But as they made their way back to NDS, Jay fell in step with Manasi and said, "The data that you need to work with Chandrika on, it is not urgent. Next week would do."

"OK," Manasi said. "Then we'll work on it early next week. Are you going to be here till next Friday?" Scott was staying till next Friday; he had scheduled meetings with the team till then, but NDS had no clue as to how long Jay was staying for.

"I am going out of Pune but I'll be back on Thursday," he said. "We can look at the data at that time."

"OK, sure." Manasi said feeling a little relaxed. She would be able to go for Rashmi's cocktail party after all!

"It would be good for a company like NDS to keep track of such data. Not only to share with customers like AccellaFab. It will help NDS if you were to track such data and analyze it periodically," Jay said as a matter of fact. He didn't seem to be critical about not having done it so far and the tone was not patronising either.

That made it easy for Manasi to nod and say, "Yes, once we look at the data we'll see how we can continue to collect it regularly and define how often to review it."

When they returned to NDS, Vikram showed the two offices that NDS had

arranged for Scott and Jay's use for the period of their visit. Both of them thanked Vikram and NDS and checked their emails before going into the meeting with the ZipMake team. The team meeting went on for far longer than the scheduled time but neither Scott nor Jay seemed to mind that. It was Niranjana who kept looking at the time from time to time. Scott was the one talking to the various members of the team as well as the leads and the project manager. But Jay was listening to the conversation closely and seemed to be making some notes. At the end of the meeting, Scott spent time handing out the gifts he had brought for each individual member of the team.

After the team left the board room, Jay said, "I think that was a good meeting." Then he looked at Manasi and asked, "How are we doing on time?"

"We are an hour behind the schedule," she said thinking that she won't be able to leave by 5:30 now.

They all looked at the planned schedule once again and Jay said, "We can postpone our meeting to Thursday." He meant the meeting Niranjana and Manasi were to have with Scott and Jay.

While that meant the day can end as per the schedule, Manasi was unhappy to postpone that session. That session, she had thought would give them an idea of how Jay saw NDS and if he was thinking of using NDS services for AccellaFab, beyond the ZipMake project. Now that will have to wait till Thursday.

## CHAPTER SIX

The cocktail party was at a resort, some twenty kilometres from Pune. Manasi got out of the car at the flower arch that was setup as the entrance for the venue of the party and Arun kaka drove to the parking. As Manasi walked through the flower arch, she noticed that there was a stage at the other end and a bar was setup in a corner. There were a few big round tables setup in front of the stage with six or seven chairs around each one. The place seemed full of people; some seated by the tables, some walking around and a few standing in groups. She looked around till she noticed Rashmi standing with a few friends and started walking over towards her. As she was walking across the fifty feet that separated the arch and the bar, where the group was standing she realised that she should have listened to her mother and at least worn a saree! She was in a burgundy silk, knee length, sleeveless cocktail dress. She was the only woman dressed in a western outfit. All the young women were dressed in jazzy lehengas or fancy churidar sets. Some older women were in fancy sarees. Many men, including Mr. Saxena, Rashmi's father was in Sherwani but there were quite a few men in western suits.

On reaching the group she said, "Hi Rashmi."

Rashmi turned around with a smile, "Hi! I am so glad you could make it!"

Manasi looked at her carefully and complemented Rashmi, "You are looking beautiful."

That of course pleased Rashmi and as she included Manasi in the group, she said, "You know most of these people. Except Gaurav probably. He is my cousin."

Manasi exchanged greeting with all. Three of the group, one girl and two guys, were her classmates from engineering college. She recognised couple of friends of Rashmi's she had met earlier. And then there was Gaurav. All of the girls were dressed in similar looking lehengas and all the guys in sherwanis that too looked similar.

All of them eyed Manasi's cocktail dress though no one said anything.

Rashmi looked around when somebody called her name. She waved to the person and before walking away said to the group, "OK. I have to go. You guys are third, remember!"

Third? Manasi didn't know what she meant. She was standing next to

Amar, one of her classmates. She turned to him and said, “Third?”

“Our performance,” he said smiling.

Manasi was thinking about that when a woman in a light green sheer saree walked onto the stage with a mike in her hand and said, “Hello everyone! We are about to start the fun! Rashmi’s family and friends have put together rocking performances for your delight! So please get ready to enjoy!”

From the group Manasi understood that, the woman was a distant relative and in the group’s opinion, though she was in her late forties she behaved like she was in early twenties. The group around her dissolved in laughter at a nasty comment made by Gaurav.

Manasi was standing there feeling out of place. She looked around and saw Rashmi’s father at one of the tables nearby. As she excused herself and walked towards him, all the speakers that were setup at various locations around the lawn came to life with a loud bang. Everyone looked at the stage and Manasi stopped in her tracks to do the same. Three girls in heavily embroidered lehengas came on stage to the beat of the song that had started off, “*Bole Chudiya Bole Kangana...*” They danced for a few seconds and three guys all dressed in stitched dhotis and long kurtas entered the stage and the six people started dancing in pairs. To Manasi, it all looked right out of some new Hindi movie. Then she corrected herself; it seemed like a bad version of a bad Hindi movie! That made her smile and she walked over to Mr. Saxena.

“I am so glad you made it Manasi,” He said warmly and then asked “How is daddy doing?”

Manasi told him how slowly but surely her father was improving. Mr. Saxena seemed genuinely happy to see her. He then turned to the stage, smiled and said, “These are Rashmi’s cousins and their wives.”

The first performance got over and the woman in sheer saree came back. She talked for couple of minutes and then the next performance started. A group of eight women, dressed in sarees came in and danced to another Movie song.

“Rashmi’s aunts,” Mr. Saxena said with a smile. Then he said, “Please enjoy yourself Manasi. Hope you will be at the wedding too! Why don’t you have something to drink?”

He made as if to walk with her to the bar and Manasi said, “It is OK uncle.

I'll get a drink. I am sure you have a lot of guests to look after." Mr. Saxena almost looked relieved.

"Can I have a Rum and Thumps Up?" Manasi asked at the bar.

With the drink in hand she turned in time to see the third performance start. The group she had been standing with earlier burst on the stage with, "*Tere liye main signal tod tad ke, Aya dilli wali girlfriend chhod chhad ke*"! Manasi was impressed at the dancing skills of this group.

She was enjoying the performance when she saw Mr. Saxena suddenly excuse himself from a group and walk as if in a hurry. Manasi followed his progress curiously with her eyes. He walked to the entrance where he greeted a tall man dressed in a gray suit. Must be someone from the groom's side, Manasi mused with a shake of her head. She turned her attention back to the stage just when the dance number came to an end. But another, an older song came on and the same group started dancing to it in the retro style. This was a lot more fun than the other dances so far.

Manasi heard Mr. Saxena's voice and so she turned around with a ready smile. Her smile froze as she recognised the guest Mr. Saxena had rushed to receive at the entrance. Mr. Saxena reached the bar, saw Manasi standing there with a glass in her hand and said, "Let me introduce you. Jay, this is Manasi Date. Her father is an old friend and someone who has been supplying spare parts to us for a long time. They also take care of our software."

"Yes, we have met," Jay said with a smile. Manasi smiled back but it was not easy.

Jay Randive was a guest here?

"Oh, I see. Yes. She was in the US, I forgot," Mr. Saxena said unaware of Manasi's awkwardness.

"No, we didn't know each other then," Manasi clarified. "ZipMake is one of NDS's American customer and Mr. Randive's company recently acquired ZipMake."

"We met this morning at NDS," Jay added.

"I see!" Mr. Saxena beamed. "Well, NDS has been making software for us for few years now. Manasi would be the right person to talk about what we need in a software product!"

Manasi looked from Mr. Saxena to Jay. What was this about?

For a flitting moment she thought she saw annoyance flash on Jay's face. But it was gone so quickly that she was not sure it was annoyance or something else. "This is no place to discuss software products," Jay said with a big smile.

Mr. Saxena laughed heartily and agreed and then pointed to the bar, "What would you like to drink Jay?"

While Mr. Saxena and Jay got busy with their drinks, Manasi had a chance to observe Jay closely. What was that about a software product? That kept bothering her. Was AccellaFab talking to Indian manufacturers and planning to make products for them? It would be a big blow to NDS and other companies like NDS who were making customised applications for different manufacturing units. Manasi felt a dread spreading over her. The December weather had not bothered her so far, but now she shivered.

Mr. Saxena turned around with a glass in his hand but then looked towards the entrance and said, "Oh! I didn't expect him! Sorry Jay, Manasi, please excuse me!" He then walked over to the entrance to receive the big industrialist who was walking through the arch just then.

Manasi would have loved to walk away but it would have seemed very rude. She could not afford to be rude to an important customer. So with effort she turned to look at Jay with a smile. She was startled to find him looking at her. He walked closer, looked at her dress and said, "You must be feeling quite out of place here!"

While many had given her looks, no one had been rude enough to say that! She looked down at her dress and then back at him. He had half a smile lurking on his lips and his eyes had a definite spark. Suddenly, what he had said didn't seem rude but humorous. Manasi found herself give a self-conscious laugh and say, "Yes!" He laughed softly in response and she found herself say, "The invitation was for a cocktail party so I picked a cocktail dress. I should have listened to my mother and worn a saree!"

He shook his head and said, "You would still have been out of place. Of course maybe not as much!" Was he teasing her now?

She at least would not have got so many stares! That after choosing her dress so carefully; not too short, no spaghetti straps, no halter neck, modest neckline. And there were so many young women dressed in sexy lehengas, some showing off their mid-riff, some wearing almost backless blouses and yet, Manasi felt that people somehow saw her as the one dressed most

skimpily!

She came out of that thought when Jay said quietly, “You are looking lovely in that dress.”

“I...” She felt lost for words. Why was he complimenting her? Was he flirting? What could she say? She finally settled for just, “Thank you.”

They both stood next to each other and watched the next performance quietly for a few moments. Rashmi and Vivek, her fiancé were up on the stage dancing to a medley of romantic songs. The audience who had been watching performances of different groups with a lot of clapping and laughter had now gone completely wild. Everyone loved watching the bride and groom on the stage dancing to their favorite songs.

“That is quite a performance,” Jay remarked. Manasi turned her head to look at him and could not understand if he was admiring it or criticising it; it was said in a completely neutral tone. He looked at her and said, “They must have practised that routine for days.”

“Yes. Definitely!” Manasi found herself agreeing. Then she decided to be brave and asked the question that had been troubling her, “How do you know Saxena uncle?”

Jay didn’t reply right away. He looked at the glass in his hand for a few moments and then as if he had made up his mind, he looked at her directly, “AccellaFab has been talking to him and some other manufacturers with the thought of making products for the Indian manufacturing industry. At this point, we are not even sure it can be done.” He was looking at her and was able to read her fear clearly, for he then added, “Even if we decide to go ahead with the plan, it will take a long time for us to launch the products in India.”

Manasi felt as if she was choking. She had to clear her throat before she could ask, “How long?” Her voice was strangely hoarse.

Jay looked at the drink in his hand as if giving it serious thought for the first time, “At least couple of years.” Then he shook his head and said, “Manasi, I was going to talk to you about this on Thursday.”

Manasi felt scared for NDS. She couldn’t tell Jay that, of course. She only nodded quietly. But Jay seemed to understand her state of mind, for he said, “We would need services of an Indian company, like NDS to make those products. My team in the US does not have the understanding of the Indian

market; they would not even understand the Indian requirements clearly. You really have nothing to worry about on account of AccellaFab.” It was all said as a matter of fact. He didn’t seem to be sugar-coating or saying it only to make her feel better.

That is precisely why it did make her feel better! She felt the fear recede; she took a deep breath and gave a small smile before saying, “I’ll take your word for it.”

Jay seemed pleased, “Let us talk more on Thursday.”

After a few moments of silence Manasi asked, “Are you going out of Pune for the same reason? Meeting other manufacturers?”

“No. I am going to the Tata hospital in Mumbai with my mother,” Jay said sombrely.

“Oh!” Manasi was taken aback. “And do you fly back next Saturday with Scott?”

Jay looked away before saying, “No. I’ll be here for a while.”

“For work?” Manasi could not leave it alone. Jay might think she was prying, but now that she knew he was thinking of launching products in India, she was worried and wanted to find out as much as possible.

Jay looked up at the sky and then at his feet and said, “I’ll work, of course. But I am here for a search.”

Search? Manasi wondered for a moment and then it struck her. After all, he was in his mid-thirties! His parents must be after him to get married! “Oh!” She said with a big smile.

Jay looked at her in surprise and raised his eyebrows. She smiled indicating she understood his plight, “I can understand. My parents didn’t leave me in peace till I got engaged.”

Jay laughed without humour and said, “No, not that search!” He looked away again and said, “Search for someone that has been missing for a long time.” He looked very serious all of a sudden. Then he turned to her and asked, “Do you remember Deepu?”

“Who?” Manasi was completely taken aback. She had heard that name after a long time. She turned to face him and said, “I don’t know who you mean. Many years ago, Deepu used to be a gardener of my grandfather’s neighbour.”



“Yes, the same,” Jay said. He continued to look sombre now.

“You know him? How do you know him? Is he in Pune?” Manasi asked every question that came to her mind. Jay gave her a sardonic smile. But before he could say anything Manasi asked him, “The search is for him?”

Jay said, “No. For his brother.”

“His brother?” Manasi was puzzled. “Deepu didn’t have a brother. It was only him and his mother.” She remembered clearly. Maybe he was thinking of someone else.

“He did have a brother. Actually...” Before Jay could complete his sentence Mr. Saxena came over and said, “Jay, why don’t you come over and say hello to Mr. Bajaj?”

“Sure,” Jay agreed eagerly and turned to put his glass on one of the bar tables, then he looked at Manasi and said, “Excuse me.” As he walked away with Mr. Saxena, Manasi noticed that his expression had changed. The sombre, serious look was gone. He was smiling as he said something to Mr. Saxena.

Manasi didn’t have time to ponder over that as Amar, Gaurav and group came over and then when the DJ started playing dance music, Amar dragged her to the dance floor. It was easy to chat with Amar, who she had known since her college days. The old familiarity and easy conversation helped her relax a little but she was feeling unsettled on various levels after her conversation with Jay that had ended so abruptly.

She had a lot of questions that she would have liked to ask Jay. How did he know Deepu and how did he know that she knew Deepu? Had Deepu told him that? She could see Jay from the dance floor, deep in conversation with couple of folks. Even later on, when she was taking a break, she saw him with Mr. Saxena and some of his family members. But she couldn’t muster courage to go over to him and draw him aside so that she could ask him those questions.

She needed to leave shortly afterward, since it was a long drive home. Also, Arun Kaka went home late so many nights when she worked till odd hours, she felt guilty asking him to do that because she wanted to have fun at a party! When she said good bye to Rashmi and then walked over to Mr. Saxena. he was standing with Jay and couple of other people. She told Mr. Saxena she was leaving and he said, “I am glad you came. Please say hello to

Bhabhiji and tell Upendra I will come over after the wedding for a chat.” She nodded and he said, “Please come for the wedding. Bring Bhabhiji along.”

“I’ll ask her, ”Manasi said. Then she turned to Jay and said, “Bye.”

He gave her a warm smile and said, “I’ll see you on Thursday.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Manasi reclined against the headrest of the backseat and listened to the soft music playing on the audio system as Arun Kaka drove towards the city at a steady pace. She found herself thinking about the time when she and Rachana had gone to stay at her grandparents' house with her mother, when her mother had suffered a miscarriage. It was a long time ago; she had been only eight then.

Her conversation with Jay had brought up the memories of the time when she had run into Deepu. He had been in tenth class then; fifteen years old. At the mention of his name, the strongest memory was of him holding her tightly in his arms as he ran really fast; she had been crying, really scared. Tommy, the dog of her grandfather's neighbour had been barking as he followed behind.

Somethings you remembered vividly even after passage of many years. She could still remember the dread she had felt when her father had woken her up in the middle of the night. He had told her that the ambulance was coming to take her mother to the hospital and he would be going with her. Her uncle, mother's brother and grandmother were coming over. That was one of the few times, when her father had held her really close and patted her lovingly. She had liked having his arms around her but she could also feel his worry. She had then asked him if she could see her mother and had gone into their room with him. She saw her mother lying in the bed and obviously in a lot of pain. She had walked slowly close to her mother and said in a small voice, "Mamma!"

Her father had then said, "Manu, she is not feeling well. But once the doctor sees her and gives her a medicine, she will be alright. Don't worry. I am going to take care of her!"

Then they could hear the siren. Her father said, "The ambulance is here," and Manasi had heard the relief in his voice. The siren was getting louder as the ambulance came closer and finally it was at their bungalow. Her father rushed to open the door and two men and a woman dressed in white came in with a stretcher. They went into her parents' room, removed her mother's blanket and moved her on to the stretcher. That is when Manasi saw all the

blood that was on the bed and thought her mother was going to die! She had run after the people carrying her mother on the stretcher but her father had stopped her at the front door. He had crouched down to hug her. As he stroked her hair, he had said, “Manu, she is going to be alright. Ajji will be here soon. Don’t worry.”

As he shut the door behind him, Manasi ran to the window and looked outside. She saw him getting into the ambulance and the ambulance sped away. She didn’t know how long it was before she heard the doorbell. But it seemed like a very long time. She ran and opened the door to her uncle and grandmother and then just stood there, looking blindly at them and shaking all over. Her grandmother picked her up and hugged her. Manasi clung to her grandmother and started sobbing. She told her grandmother about all the blood she saw and about her fear that her mother was going to die. Her grandmother had talked to Manasi softly and told her that sometimes things like these happened. But her mother was going to be alright. Her uncle had then tried to cheer her up by talking to her about her school and his last trip and many other things. But Manasi was still restless. She refused to go to bed and stayed up with her uncle and grandmother.

It was some four hours later that her father called and informed them that Anupama was alright but they had lost the baby. Manasi had seen her grandmother wipe her eyes and murmur, “God, you saved my daughter.” Then she had gone and lit a lamp in front of Rama’s idol and bowed down in Namaskar. She had made Manasi bow down too. More than the phone call, what her grandmother did after the phone call, went a long way in making Manasi feel that her mother was going to be alright.

Rachana had been only four then and had slept through the dramatic night. Manasi was seated at the dining table and talking to her grandmother who was at the kitchen counter, when Rachana had woken up and came over. Manasi had said, “Rachu, Mamma is not well, so daddy has taken her to the hospital. But she is OK. We can go and see her today!” Her grandmother had turned and walked over to pick Rachana up.

It had been towards late afternoon that her uncle had finally taken the two girls to the hospital. Anu had been on a drip and very weak. But she had managed to smile and talk to Manasi and Rachana; that had been quite reassuring for the two girls.

Few days later, one night, Manasi woke up from a bad dream, her heart

pounding madly. She sat up and was thinking about going to her parents' room when she heard her father talking to her grandmother. He was sounding sad and unhappy. Then her grandmother was saying something, sounding quite upset. Manasi could not understand what was being discussed. But she had got up thinking that something was wrong with her mother again! She was about to go in to the living room when she had her father say, "OK. Fine! Anu and the girls can stay with you for a few months!"

Two days later her grandmother, who had stayed with them since Anu was taken to the hospital, went home. A day later, Anu, Manasi and Rachana with a lot of luggage climbed in the car and Upendra drove them over to Anu's father's house on Prabhat road. It was very obvious to Manasi that her father was not happy with the arrangement. He had talked very little on the drive over. When they reached her grandfather's place, he unloaded all the luggage and left within five minutes. Manasi had seen her mother wipe her eyes quietly and sigh.

The girls were quite familiar with their grandparents place but they had never stayed there for longer than two days. Since they were going to stay for a few months this time, her grandmother had arranged Anu to have one room to herself and the two girls were put in the bigger room next to hers. Manasi was in 4th class that year and Rachana at 4 was in the kindergarten. Both of them had missed a few days of school after Anu was hospitalised and Upendra didn't want them to miss any more. So he informed the school and changed their bus route so they could be picked up from their grandparents' house. Manasi clearly remembered the nameplate on the big wooden door of that house - 'Narayan & Nalini Chaphekar' it had said in Devnagari script.

Manasi had realised that her mother was still not well. She had also seen Anu cry often and generally be sad. Manasi had asked her grandmother why her mother was so sad and when she will get better. Her grandmother had told Manasi that slowly Anu was going to get better. But Manasi and Rachana needed to be good girls as that would make Anu happy and help her get well faster. Manasi had taken that to heart and she did everything she could think of, to be a good girl. She got up as soon as her grandmother called her in the morning, and drank her milk without any complaints, though she didn't like it. She was always ready before the school bus arrived. When she came back from school, she went to see her mother, told her what she did in the school and did her homework. Rachana at four was too small and had

trouble adjusting. She cried a lot and asked to sleep with Anu. Manasi told her stories and told her that they had to be good girls so that Anu could get better soon.

Anupama's sister-in-law, her brother's wife, had gone to her parents' place in Sangli as she was expecting their second child. She had taken their son, who was Rachana's age with her. Anu's brother, who worked in a big multinational company, used to leave home around 8:00 a.m. and return only after 6:00 p.m. Rachana would come back from school by 1:00 p.m., have lunch with her mother and grandparents and nap with her mother in the afternoon. Manasi would return around four in the afternoon and after changing out of her uniform and after having had milk without any complaint, would go out in the front yard to play. She would run around a little, talk to the trees and the birds, look at the beetles and ants and watch the cars, hoping to see her father's.

Just a few days after they went over to stay at Manasi's grandparents' house, one evening, she and Rachana were playing in the yard while Anu was reading a magazine in the veranda, when Manasi saw a thin, lanky boy in old clothes watering the plants in the neighbor's garden across the wired fence. It seemed like he was talking to the plants as he watered them.

She asked Anu, "Mamma, who is that?"

Anu looked up from her magazine, looked at him and said, "I don't know."

Later that evening, on the dining table Anu asked her mother about the boy.

"Mai is Joshi's new servant. That is her son. It's a sad story." Then she looked at the two girls listening attentively and said, "I have made your favourite kheer, but you must finish other things too!" Manasi had seen the grandmother make some hand gestures which she had understood meant that the story would be told to Anu when the girls were not around.

Then one evening, her grandmother took Anu and the two girls over to the Joshi's house. The door was opened by a sad looking, dark woman who wore a nine yard, dark blue hand loom saree with traditional border, and a dark yellow blouse made of *khan*. Manasi noticed that she didn't have bindi but there was a tattoo on her forehead.

Manasi's grandmother smiled at the woman and said, "Mai this is my daughter Anupama. And my granddaughters Manasi and Rachana. How is Vahini?"

The woman called Mai smiled but she still looked sad. She said, “Vahini is feeling alright today. I will call her.”

Then Vahini or Joshi Kaku, as Anu called her, came out. She was a frail looking woman; she looked old and tired. But when she saw them, she smiled a big smile and said, “Please come Anu. It has been such a long time since I saw you. I am feeling much better today, so I am glad you came. I had heard you have come over, but you know how my health is! Having Mai here has been a big help though!”

Joshi Kaku sat and chatted with Anu and her mother while Mai went into the kitchen. Joshi Kaku saw the girls getting restless and said, “Go in the kitchen. Mai will give you biscuits.”

Both the girls happily went into the kitchen and Manasi said, “Mai, we want biscuits.”

Mai smiled and gave them some cookies in two different plates. She talked to them while she made tea for the three ladies. Manasi liked Mai, but she didn’t quite understand everything she was saying. She used different words and her accent was noticeably different. When the tea was ready, she put it all on a tray along with two plates of snacks and carried it to the living room. Manasi and Rachana followed her.

In the living room, Anupama was asking Joshi Kaku, “Where is Kaka?”

“Oh, he will be back soon. He has just taken Tommy to the vet.”

“What is vet?” Manasi asked as she sat next to Anupama.

Anupama looked down at her, smiled and said, “Not what, who. Vet is a doctor for animals. Dogs, cats, cows...”

Mai had put down the tray on the centre table and was handing cups to the three women. Joshi Kaku took a cookie from the plate Mai held in front of her and said, “Deepu must be hungry.” Then she looked at Manasi and said, “Manasi, go call Deepu. He would be in the garden, watering the plants.”

Manasi went out but didn’t see anyone in the lawn and flower garden in the front. Then she walked around the house to the backyard where the kitchen garden was and saw the boy she had noticed a few days earlier. He was thin like a reed and quite dark. She went and stood next to him and he looked at her. She had to look up a long way; he seemed a lot taller at close quarters. He too had sad eyes, like Mai’s. Manasi smiled at him, but he didn’t respond.

Manasi then asked, “Are you Deepu?”

“Yes,” he said softly.

“I am Manu,” she said, introducing herself.

“Manu?” he asked.

“Manasi Date!” she told him her full name, very clearly, stressing each word; her chin was jutting out and both hands were on the waist. He looked at her for a few moments without any expression and then suddenly, he smiled. She smiled back and said, “Joshi Kaku has called you.”

“I am almost done. I’ll complete this and come. Few minutes.” He spoke with the same accent as Mai.

Manasi came back to present when the car stopped suddenly. She looked outside and saw that they were entering the city and had stopped at a traffic light.

“Arun Kaka do you remember Joshi Ajji-Ajoba, who lived next to Ajji’s house?” She asked the driver.

“Yes, Tai.” He replied promptly; then after a moment said, “But after your grandparents moved, we never went to their place.”

That was true. That time more than twenty years ago, when they had stayed at her grandparents’ place for a few months while Anu recuperated, was the last time she had been to Joshi’s house. Her uncle had changed his job and had gone to Jamshetpur. Her grandparents had gone to Jamshetpur couple of months later with their daughter-in-law, her four year old and the new baby. A year later, Manasi’s grandparents who had lived in rented house on Prabhat road for over twenty five years had vacated that house and moved to a small town in Konkan.

She remembered how loving Joshi Kaku was. And Anu had been so close to her. Why didn’t Anu ever visit Joshis after her parent left Pune?

Arun Kaka who had been quiet for a few moments, told her, “Joshis house was pulled down few years ago. Now there is a big building there.”

“Oh!”, Manasi said. She should ask her mother if she knew about this. She should also ask her about Deepu. She would remember more. Also, what was the sad story about Mai and Deepu that Manasi’s grandmother had not told her? It had not come up after that in so many years but tonight, Manasi was eager to know as if it was something recent.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

On Saturdays Manasi would normally sleep in as much as possible. But she had things on her mind that she needed to talk to her mother about. The big clock in the dining room was chiming seven when she walked in. Her mother was seated at the table with a cup of tea and the newspaper. She looked up in surprise and said, "Good morning, Manu."

"Morning Mamma," she said cheerfully and walked to the other side of the big table where a tea-pot was under a tea cosy and a tray was full of cups and saucers. As she poured tea for herself, she wondered if there was anyone else still being so formal about the tea!

"You are up early this morning," her mother was saying.

"I wanted to have tea with you and have a long chat." Previous night, when she had come in, it was quite late. She had one mind to ask her mother about Deepu right then, but her mother had looked so sleepy and so eager to retire that Manasi didn't have heart to stop her.

"How was the party?"

"It was OK. I met few of my classmates, danced a little. But you were right." Anupama raised her eyebrows hearing that last part. Manasi smiled a little and continued, "I should have worn a saree."

"Everyone else was in a saree, right?"

"No. Elder women were in sarees. But all girls my age were in Lehenga or Anarkali."

"Anarkali?" Anu asked with a sardonic look.

"It is a flared, long kurta worn over a churidar," Manasi did her best to explain. "I'll show you sometime."

"Did you manage to meet Saxena uncle?"

"Yes. He has asked after daddy. He has also insisted that you attend the wedding," She sipped her tea and sighed.

Anupama had turned to her newspaper.

"Mamma," Manasi said after a few moments. When Anupama looked up from the paper Manasi went ahead, "Do you remember Mai and Deepu?"

"Of course Manu!" Anupama said. "How did you suddenly remember them today?"

“Someone mentioned them yesterday at the party.”

“At the party?” Anupama seemed surprised

“Yes. Jay Randive was at the party and he mentioned them.”

“The big shot customer from US who was visiting NDS yesterday?”

Anupama sounded incredulous. She then carefully folded the newspaper and put it away. “How does he know them?”

“I don’t know. But he said Deepu is in Pune and that he has a brother. Did Deepu have a brother?” Manasi asked earnestly. Why didn’t she remember the brother?

Anupama’s brow was creased. She shook her head, “He was alone I think. Only Mai and him.”

“That is what I remembered!” Manasi felt better when her mother’s memory matched hers. “They were living in Joshi’s outhouse that time when we went to stay at Aajji’s place. And they were new there, weren’t they?” She looked to Anupama for confirmation. “There was some sad story about them. Aajji had said once. But of course, she never told us what.” Anupama was nodding. “What was the story?”

Anupama shook her head, looked up as if trying to remember and said, “I think, Mai’s husband, Deepu’s father had died few months earlier, in a clash between two castes or communities in their village. And Mai had come to Pune with Deepu so that he could complete his education.” She looked at Manasi and said, “I will have to ask Aai. I don’t remember clearly. I used to be so sad then and was too buried in my sorrow.”

Manasi could see the shadows of that sorrow surfacing in Anupama’s eyes remembering the time.

“Deepu had wanted to be a teacher,” Manasi said remembering one of her conversation with him in Joshi’s garden. “He used to be very quiet but I liked him because he used to listen to me. He was very nice to me Mamma,” Manasi smiled, remembering her friend from long ago.

“More than that, Manu!” Anupama said emphatically. “He literally saved you! Who knows what would have happened, if he had not been going that way or if he had not acted as quickly as he did!” Manasi saw her shudder and fight to control her emotions. After all these years, memory of that incident still shook her as well. Anupama reached out and held her hand. Manasi looked at her and she said, “For some days afterwards, you used to wake up

in the night, screaming.” Manasi remembered that. Then her grandmother had started sleeping with the two girls and her nightmares had stopped. Anupama smiled gently, “Thank God Deepu was there!” Then she sighed and said, “I didn’t know how I would ever be able to thank him for what he did.” She had tears shining in her eyes. “At that time, I was too much into myself; I was physically weak and very sad.” She didn’t say it, but Manasi knew that she was sad also because Upendra didn’t visit her much. Manasi remembered how she herself would hope every day that Upendra would visit that day; would hold onto that hope till dinner time and then feel the surge of disappointment. She never asked any of the adults in the house if he would visit or why he didn’t visit. Rachana was asking anyway. She turned her attention to what Anupama was saying, “But later on I had thought we should do something for him. I had called Joshi Kaka after a few months. He had said that he was looking after Deepu’s studies. He had said Deepu might need help with admission after 10th and said he would let us know if required. But he didn’t need any help I think. Joshi Kaka didn’t call.” Then she said in a small voice, “We didn’t keep in touch with Joshi’s after Aai-Baba left Pune.”

“Why didn’t we Mamma?” Manasi asked. “Weren’t you close to Joshi Kaku?”

“Daddy didn’t want us to,” Anupama said pulling back her hand from Manasi’s and looking away.

“But, why?”

“Manu,” Anupama said. But she saw Akka walk in and shook her head. She got up saying, “Let’s talk about this later.” Then she went into the kitchen with Akka. Manasi sipped her tea quietly for a while, then she got up and filled her cup again. She went into the kitchen and through the back door into the backyard. She walked across to the mango tree and sat on the garden chair there, sipping her tea. Thoughts of that time at her grandparents place were lingering in her mind. What was Deepu doing now? Jay had said he was in Pune. Had he become a teacher like he had wanted to?

After that first visit to Joshi’s, whenever Manasi saw Deepu near the fence, she would walk to the wired fence and speak to him. She liked talking to him because he was someone who was not an adult and he was not a small child, like Rachana. He also was quite different from other children she met in the school. And he worked in the garden; he knew a lot about the garden.

She asked him all kinds of questions. Why did some plants need more water than others? How did Deepu know how much water the plant needed? Why did he pluck some of the leaves? Why did he cut off some branches? Did it hurt the plants when he did that? Deepu would patiently answer her questions as he tended to various tasks in the garden but he would not say anything other than answering her questions. He would not ask her anything and he would not tell her anything on his own.

Then one evening while she was talking to him across the fence, she heard the slam of a car door and saw her father walk through the gate. Excitedly, she ran to him and said, “Daddy that is Deepu. He knows so much about the garden!”

Her father didn’t show any interest in Deepu or his knowledge about the garden. He ignored him and walked to the house. He climbed the three steps into the veranda and walked through the door after knocking on the open door with his knuckles. Manasi’s grandfather was in the living room and he welcomed Upendra. Then he went inside to call Anupama.

“Manu, we don’t want you wasting your evenings, talking to dirty gardeners!” Upendra told Manasi just as Anupama was coming into the living room. He looked up at Anu and asked, “How are you now?” It seemed like he asked that because he was supposed to.

Anu smiled a gentle smile and said, “I am better. Still weak, but definitely improving.” She went and sat on the sofa next to him and said, “How are you managing?”

“I manage. Managing myself is not a problem,” he said crossly. Then he turned back to Manasi who was standing by his side and said, “She needs a good activity to keep her busy after the school.”

“She wants to learn dancing,” Anupama said.

“No!” He turned to look at Anupama and managed to convey his strong disapproval with that one, small word quite well. But he elaborated anyway, “My daughter is not going to learn dancing.”

“Well, she has a good voice, she could learn to sing,” Anupama was anyway partial to that art form since she herself had learnt classical music.

“No. Not singing either,” He looked back at Manasi and holding out his hand to her, said, “Manu, you should play something. How about tennis?”

“Tennis?” Manasi asked in a small voice as she put her hand hesitantly in

his big one.

“Yes,” He said pulling her around to stand in front of him. Then he looked at Anupama, “This place is so close to Deccan Gymkhana and PYC. I’ll enrol her in one of the two. I am a member of Deccan so I would prefer that.”

Though Anupama felt sad that Manasi would not get to learn either dance or music, she didn’t have any objection to tennis. “Deccan is really close by, only about a ten minute walk from here.” She smiled at Manu and said, “You will like tennis Manu, I am sure!”

So Manasi was put in a coaching program right away. She got a new set of clothes for tennis, and a good pair of shoes. And of course a good racket.

Babu was her grandfather’s man Friday, someone who had been working for Chaphekars for over ten years. He came every evening for about three hours. He did whatever Narayan Chaphekar asked him to do; cleaning the overhead tanks once in a while, cleaning the terrace, tending to the yard; Chaphekars didn’t have a proper garden like Joshis, but there were a few trees and bushes to take care of. Every evening he made beds for everyone and he went to get everyday needs like grocery, vegetables and bread.

When the tennis classes started, Babu would walk her to Deccan Gymkhana at 6:15 and he would be waiting at the gate of the club at 7:30 when her class got over, to walk her back home.

To start with she didn’t quite like going for the tennis class every evening and she complained to her grandmother a couple of times. But soon, she started liking it, and then started looking forward to it. She would come back from the school looking forward to the tennis class. She would change out of her school uniform and get into her tennis clothes before going out into the yard.

Few days after the tennis class started, she saw Deepu walking back from school with an old school bag on his back. As he entered through Joshi’s gate, she called him, “Deepu, I go to play tennis now.” She had not seen him since her tennis class had started.

He looked at her new clothes and shoes and asked, “Tennis?”

“Yes. See my new racket,” she said holding up her racket. He looked at the racket blankly not knowing what tennis was.

“Where do you go?” That was the first proper question he had asked her ever.

“Deccan Gymkhana,” she told him. “That way, then left in the lane and then right,” she explained pointing with her finger.

“I take Tommy that way sometimes,” he volunteered the information; also for the first time. Joshi Kaka walked their dog, Tommy but these days he asked Deepu to do that, especially when he felt Deepu was restless.

“Let’s go Manasi Tai,” Babu came out of the house and said. Manasi waved at Deepu and held Babu’s outstretched hand.

She had been going for the tennis class for over two weeks when one day, Babu dropped her off at the club as usual and went off on his errands. But when Manasi went inside, she found out that their class was not going to take place that evening. There were only three other children who had landed up, like Manasi because other children’s parents had read the notice that the club had put up a week earlier. The club arranged for the four kids to go and watch the athletics on the field, so that they would be occupied till the time when they would be picked up. Manasi sat there with the three boys, watching older kids running and jumping; then she decided that she would walk home. It was close by and she knew the way; she walked everyday with Babu. So she quietly got up and left.

She walked like every day, but then she saw a big stray dog and so she crossed the road and walked on the other side. She was too busy trying to get away from the big dog and missed turning into the lane they normally took and went beyond. She turned left in to a lane a little ahead and realised it was not the road they took daily. She got confused and turning around walked back a little. But in her confusion she could not remember which way she had come into this lane. Manasi knew then, that she was lost. She got really scared and didn’t quite know what to do. She walked ahead a little, then came back, then again changed the direction. That is when she saw a motorcycle a little distance away. One man was seated on it and one was standing by him talking. She realised both of them were looking at her. The man standing on the side smiled at her when she walked closer. She stopped near them and asked, “Do you know how to go to Prabhat Road?”

The man on the motor cycle kick started the bike and the man standing on the side said, “Yes. We’ll drop you there.”

“No. I will walk,” Manasi didn’t like their look; she felt something was not quite right.

“I’ll tell you what we will do”, the man was saying as he held Manasi’s hand. She tried to pull her hand away but he didn’t let her go. And he continued to talk, “We’ll first go and buy you ice cream. Would you like that?”

Manasi started saying, “No. I don’t want to go,” but he then picked her up and sat her on the motor cycle. “No. Put me down!” Manasi screamed. She was struggling as best as she could. The man was trying to hold her in place and sit behind her.

As she squirmed and struggled, she suddenly saw Deepu in the distance and started screaming in earnest, “Deepu! Deepu!”

Deepu had been walking Tommy. On hearing the scream, he left Tommy’s leash and came running. He held the handle on the backseat with both his arms and started yelling, “Help! Help!” Tommy came running behind, barking his head off. The two men suddenly looked unsure. Deepu kept screaming but then before the two men could push him and ride off with Manasi, in one quick action, he left the handle, grabbed hold of Manasi and pulled her towards him. When she clung tightly to him, in one swift pull he freed her from the man on the backseat of the motorcycle and started running. He ran with Manasi held tightly to his chest, her arms wound round his neck. Tommy followed behind, still barking. Deepu slowed down a little on reaching Prabhat road. The lanes were completely deserted, but there was some traffic on Prabhat Road. More importantly, there were street lights.

Deepu went to Chaphekar’s house and rang the bell. Narayan Chaphekar opened the door and saw Deepu standing there, with Manasi in his arms, crying. “What has happened?” He asked sounding scared. Deepu couldn’t say anything immediately. When he had heard Manasi’s scream, he had acted on his instinct and ran to help without having to consciously think. But now, he was not able to find words to explain what had happened. Fortunately, it was Narayan Chaphekar he faced and not Upendra Date. Narayan Chaphekar moved to one side and said, “Come in. Sit down.” Then he opened his arms and said, “Manu? Come to me.”

Deepu handed over Manasi to her grandfather and stood there inside the door. “Ajoba!” Manasi said clinging to her grandfather and pressing her face to the side of his neck.

“It’s OK Manu. It’s OK,” He said patting her gently on her back. He sat down on the sofa and called out, “Nalini!”

Both Anupama and her mother came out and realised something was wrong.

Anupama looked at Manasi in her father's arms and went over to sit next to him. "Manu," she said softly and Manasi turned to her. She then took Manasi in her arms and held her, stroking her back gently. Anupama looked at Deepu standing in the door. He was shaking now. She said, "Come Deepu. Sit down."

Nalini brought a jug of water and glassed. When she saw Deepu hesitate, she said, "Come. Sit down."

Deepu walked a little closer and sat on the straight back chair that was usually used only for wearing shoes. He took the glass of water and sipped slowly. "I heard her scream. There were two big men on a motorcycle. And they were..." He could not go ahead.

Everyone turned around on hearing Joshi Kaka's voice calling Deepu. Deepu got up suddenly, but Narayan Chaphekar said, "It's OK. I'll call him over," and he went out.

Manasi had stopped sobbing now but she was unwilling to leave Anupama's lap. Joshi Kaka came over and after a few minutes Deepu managed to voice what had happened. When Deepu went quiet, Manasi said almost like a whisper, "There was a big dog there. Bigger than Tommy." Anupama didn't ask or say anything that evening. On account of Manasi's trauma, she slept in Anupama's room that night and Rachana slept with Nalini.

Next day, Manasi was running a fever and so didn't go to school. Anupama sat with her and talked to her about the previous evening; she got Manasi to talk about how she happened to be walking home, got lost and then talked to the two men. Anupama had taught the girls not to talk to strangers, not to take sweets offered by strangers and Manasi had never done that before. It took two days for the fever to come down and for Anupama to be able to leave Manasi's side.

"Manu?!" Anupama's voice brought Manasi back to present.

"I am here, Mamma! Outside," she called out.

Anupama looked out of the kitchen Window and then after a couple of minutes, came out with a tray. She smiled at Manasi and said, "We can have



breakfast here.”

“Where is Akka?” Manasi asked.

“She has gone to lie down for a while. She is feeling very cold today.”

“Is she not feeling well?” Manasi asked worriedly.

“She is OK. But with the age, she is not able to handle the cold weather,” Anupama herself was wearing a cardigan.

The weather had cooled down in the last few days, but Manasi was glad about that. She had struggled with the scorching heat when she returned and started handling NDS. That was in May and heat was the thing that bothered her the most.

“Here. I made it the way you like it,” Anupama said handing Manasi a plate piled high with pohe.

Manasi smiled taking the plate and said, “Aah! With peanuts and potato!!” She ate couple of spoonfuls and said, “Oh, yummy! This is something I really missed in the US.”

“Why? You can make them just like this!” Anupama said, a plate for herself in her hand, as she sat on the ledge built around the tree.

“I know the recipe and I try to make them just like this. But they never come out this good! And the luxury of someone else making them, first thing in the morning...”

Two of them sat there enjoying their breakfast and listening to chirping birds. Anupama then poured fresh cups of tea for Manasi and herself. Taking the cup from her Manasi asked, “Mamma, that time when I almost got kidnapped, did we lodge a police complaint?”

Anupama shook her head, “We didn’t lodge an official complaint. But Baba went over to the police station and informed them what had happened. Police had said, they’ll keep a watch.” Then she looked at the question in Manasi’s eyes and said, “Nothing had happened. It was an attempt. And Baba and Joshi Kaka felt it would be best not to lodge a complaint and involve Deepu in it. Police might not have been very nice to him.”

“Oh!” Manasi had not realised that. “I am glad.” She said quietly. She was glad that Deepu had not been troubled because of the incident. She was quiet for some time, thinking about that time again. Then she put down her cup and said, “I want to go and meet Deepu. Jay said he is in Pune. I’ll ask Jay to put me in touch with him.”

Anupama looked away and quietly said, "Daddy would not like it."

"Well, Daddy does not need to know," Manasi said getting up. "And why didn't he want you to keep in touch with Joshis?" She asked the question that was left unanswered at the dining table.

"Daddy thought they behaved too middle class," Anupama said. Then she smiled a sad smile and continued, "And because he found out that Sudhir, Joshis' son had wanted to marry me."

"Oh!" This was interesting! "When we stayed at Ajji's, their son was not living with them, right?"

"No. He was in Delhi that time."

"So he had proposed to you?"

"Not exactly. He had talked to Joshi Kaku and she had talked to Aai. But I was still in college and Baba asked both the women to wait till I graduated. No one said anything to me." Was she sad about that? Had she liked him?

"And then?" Manasi prompted.

Anupama smiled a sad smile, "When I was in the last year, Upendra talked to me and came home and proposed. Aai and Baba were thrilled." Then after a pause, she said, "Actually, so was I. Upendra was a young entrepreneur, doing very well. He was a good 'catch' by any standard."

"And Sudhir?"

"Sudhir was four years older than me. He had completed his MBA and got a good job. But Upendra was in a different league." Anupama looked away. Manasi stood there, looking at her mother; trying to picture her as the young girl she must have been when all this had happened. Anupama continued to look far away and said, "And Sudhir had never said anything to me about marriage."

What would have happened if Sudhir had talked to Anupama? Would she have rejected Upendra's proposal? Would she have been happier with Sudhir?

Anupama sighed and said, "All in the past now."

"Where is Sudhir now?"

"Chennai. His wife is from Chennai. They have two sons. I think the older one is in 10th now."

"Oh! Quite young!"

“He got married only when he was forty,” Anupama said with an enigmatic expression.

If she wasn't in touch with Joshis how did she know so much about Sudhir, Manasi wondered. But she didn't say anything.

“Joshi Kaku passed away last year,” Anupama said looking away. “I had gone to see Kaka when I heard and Sudhir was there too.”

“Oh. So where is Joshi Ajoba now?”

“Here in Pune. He lives all alone.” Anupama said and got up, putting an end to the conversation.

## CHAPTER NINE

Thoughts about Joshis and Deepu and even Sudhir, whom she had never met, lingered over the weekend. Manasi asked Anupama more about Joshis and got to know that Anupama had known that they had a flat in the big building that replaced their bungalow, even before Kaku passed away, and also that they had moved into the flat four years ago.

Overall, it was a good weekend in many ways. Manasi could understand some of what her father said. Was it because she was now used to deciphering his garbled talk better or was he really getting better? Of course he was getting better, she admonished herself. He managed to move his right arm and leg beyond the earlier range; where he was stuck for over a month. The physiotherapist congratulated him and he actually smiled a little. Rachana called and Manasi had a long chat with her; something the two of them had not been able to do for a long time. On another front, her call with Rakesh ended on a positive note, again something that had not happened for a while.

Manasi was eagerly waiting for Thursday when Jay would be back and she would be able to ask him about Deepu. But there were other things needing her time and attention before that.

Monday was a busy day. Scott was having meetings with the team and Niranjana was worried about someone from the team saying something out of place. So he was hovering around unnecessarily. He sat through meetings in which his presence was not needed. In fact, it was proving to be a hindrance. At lunch time, Scott talked to Manasi and said that the meetings would be more fruitful if Niranjana was not there. On Tuesday, on Vikram's suggestion she talked to a project manager of a different project in Niranjana's group and suggested he ask Niranjana for a review of that project. That worked out surprisingly well for everyone. Niranjana got busy with the review of another project and Scott could meet the team peacefully. Manasi herself worked with Chandrika on the HR reports.

Working with Chandrika and getting her to see a point of view other than her own was a challenge, but they were making progress on the report.

"I don't agree with you. This is not how we did things at NDS earlier. Upendra would not have done it this way. But you are the boss. If you want it this way I'll do it this way," Chandrika said sullenly on some points.

Manasi put her foot down, “Yes, let us do it this way; even if NDS didn’t do it this way earlier.”

After that meeting, Chandrika sulked till end of the day but Manasi decided to ignore it. She didn’t have time and patience for childish tantrums. Was Chandrika like this with her father too? Manasi couldn’t imagine her father tolerating this kind of behaviour. Why had her father hired Chandrika in the first place? She didn’t have any experience in HR. She was an engineer who had steered away from engineering work and got into HR just by chance. A person with HR background would have been better prepared to answer Jay’s questions, Manasi thought. Maybe she should talk to her father about Chandrika. Maybe not. Maybe she should talk to Vikram instead.

On Wednesday evening, Scott, having met with most of the team members individually and seen their work, told her that he was happy with all of them and their work. He got along well with the Project Manager and the Dev lead and said that it would help if both of them could make a trip to the US, to visit customer locations so that they would understand how the customers used their products.

By that evening, the numbers Jay had asked on various aspects were all ready in form of a formal presentation. Manasi was happy with the presentation that she had taken pains to create tolerating Chandrika’s tantrums, but she was nervous about presenting it to Jay.

Manasi was restless on Wednesday night. On one hand she was looking forward to Jay’s return because he could tell her about Deepu. But on the other hand, she was not sure he would be satisfied with their HR reports and she was not sure they could make the right impression. Would he be happy enough to give them more work? She also wanted to know more about AccellaFab’s plan of making products for Indian manufacturers. Jay had said they would need to work with someone like NDS, but how much would they work with NDS? And how much their current Indian business would NDS lose?

“Manasi, what is bothering you? You are not eating properly,” Akka said halfway through the dinner and Manasi looked up startled. Akka was looking at her curiously. “Are you not well?” Akka asked concerned.

Manasi shook her head, “I am OK Akka. Some work related things on my mind.”

“Focus on the food for now,” Akka said with a kind smile and before

Manasi could realize what she was doing, she served more sheera on her plate.

Finally it was Thursday! Manasi made her way to NDS earlier than usual and was in her office by 8:15 a.m. While there was nothing that she needed to do that early, it felt good to go over everything once again. Scott and Jay arrived at 9:00 as did Niranjana and Chandrika.

Chandrika presented the report they had put together with effort and Manasi was happy to hear Jay say, "That is more like it! Good job."

Manasi couldn't help looking at Chandrika and smiling smugly. Chandrika blustered but of course could not say anything directly to Manasi. So instead she said, "I of course knew what an organisation pyramid is all about and defining the ideal pyramid for an organisation, but at NDS we have always done things differently."

"AccellaFab would look for things like these when deciding to work with any organisation," Jay said, looking at Manasi.

Manasi was glad then that she had put her foot down and insisted on pulling out these numbers and presenting them this way. It could have been a very different story otherwise.

Jay talked about more things AccellaFab would like to see and for NDS to do when Jay, Scott, Niranjana and Manasi had their meeting. At end of that meeting, Niranjana and Scott left together for a photo session with the team, giving Manasi the opportunity she needed to talk to Jay.

"I wanted to talk to you about a few things," She said, when only Jay and she were left in the boardroom.

"Yes, I have a few things to discuss too," Jay was agreeable. "Scott is very happy with the team he has worked with and that work can continue as it is. Overall, we are happy with the technical skills of the NDS folks but there are some things that we need to discuss and iron out." He closed his laptop and putting it in his bag asked, very casually, "I need to be in India for some time. And I need a place to work. I was wondering if NDS would be willing to let me work from this place." Manasi was taken aback. He wanted to work from here? That was a rather unusual 'ask'. Manasi did some quick thinking. What harm could it be? In fact, if they let him work from their premises to help him, it would be difficult for him then to take his business somewhere else wouldn't it? Should she agree right away?

“Let me talk to a few people about that and get back to you.”

“Sure.” He said curtly. Was he displeased? Did he expect her to just say yes because he was an important customer?

She picked up her laptop and said, “We can go to my office.”

He held the door open to her courteously and then fell in step with her as she walked across the work halls to her office. She put her laptop on the big glass desk and said, “Please have a seat. Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?”

Jay sat down and said, “Coffee would be fine.”

As she picked up the intercom, he said, “Can it be black and without sugar?”

She asked the receptionist to get black, sugarless coffee for Jay and a regular one for herself.

When she turned back to Jay, he was smiling. Looking at her raised eyebrows he said, “Luxuries of working in India. Ordering coffee to be sent to one’s office is not something that can happen in the US.”

Manasi smiled in reply. It could not happen to someone who was a development lead in Microsoft, but as the CEO of AccellaFab, surely Jay could do that. They were here to discuss business matters and not chat about differences between working in India and the US. However, by his remark Jay had indicated that he wouldn’t mind a casual touch to their conversation; that it didn’t not have to be all formal.

Manasi was dying to ask about Deepu, but being the responsible CEO of NDS, she opened the conversation with, “I would like to know more about your plans to start making products for the Indian market.”

Jay gave her an inscrutable look and said, “I have talked to a few manufacturers about their requirements and pain points with the current applications or softwares they are using. And it is very clear that we would need a team here in India - not just a technical team, but even for sales & marketing. I think someone like NDS can play an important role in the overall plan. But it is too early yet. I don’t have a concrete plan in place right now. However, I would like to involve someone from NDS in the meetings with various manufacturers. The person should have a good understanding of product development. Someone senior, who can talk to the customers, ask the right questions.”

He wanted someone from NDS for something new and challenging. It was quite exciting! “Someone like Niranjana, do you mean? Actually, our Indian projects are run in a different group and that group is headed by Mayank. He can be the right person.” Manasi couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice.

Jay relaxed in the chair and stretched out his legs. Then he smiled an enigmatic smile and said, “We can bring in Mayank, since he handles Indian projects, but I meant someone like you.”

“Me?” She sounded incredulous.

Jay laughed a little and said, “We can discuss and decide. We can definitely involve Mayank.”

Jay then mentioned his concern about NDS’s HR practises and said, “I would have expected that a HR manager would be able to answer the questions I asked right away. It was rather surprising that in some cases, she didn’t even know what I was asking for.”

“Chandrika actually does not have a background in HR. She comes from engineering background; this is her first HR position.”

“I wondered if that was the case,” Jay said. “Though background itself would not be a problem, if she was able to set up the right policies and processes; watch the right parameters, analyze them regularly. That does not seem to be the case.” He toyed with a pen on the table; flipping it in his hand. “When a company is very small, you can get by with little or no formality in your HR practices and policies. But as you grow, that function needs to have a solid base. You might not have felt the impact of the randomly managed HR function till this point, but growth beyond this would become practically impossible if you do not do something about that function. Even at this size, managing would be easier if you know how you are doing on various parameters. You probably need to review other support functions similarly.”

He seemed genuinely concerned about NDS and he seemed to be advising for its growth; not use their shortcomings he had noticed against them in anyway. If he worked out of NDS premises, he might be able to see the workings of the other functions and advise her similarly.

“I myself have no background in HR and in last six months I have been focusing mostly on the engineering side,” Manasi found herself explaining her position.



“And making a difference there. Scott and Chris are very happy with the changes you have made to the way NDS team works,” Jay said admiringly.

Manasi shook her head, “I have only been able to work with our non-Indian projects so far. I need to start looking at the Indian projects. And as you pointed out, I also need to start looking at HR and other support functions.”

Jay put his forearms on the table and said, “I would do the two in parallel. It would be valuable to review and take care of some basic things for the support functions even before getting into the Indian projects.”

If she could ask for his guidance on the functions and also on prioritising... She only nodded. Then she noticed Jay looking at his watch and said, “There was something else I wanted to ask you.”

“Yes?” Jay prompted her.

“Nothing about NDS or ZipMake project. Something you said at the cocktail party on Friday.”

Jay smiled raising his eyebrows as if he had anticipated what she was going to ask.

Manasi bent forward and put her forearms on the table hand on hand, mirroring him. “You said Deepu is in Pune. Where is he? What does he do? Can you please put me in touch with him?”

Jay stared at her, not saying anything. Manasi could not read his expression at all; it was like coming up against a blank. Manasi felt uncomfortable at the way he continued to stare and said, “When I was in 4th, I had stayed at my grandparents’ place for a few months and Deepu, as you know was the neighbour’s gardener. We became good friends.” She said smiling softly. “And he actually saved me from getting kidnapped.” She said looking out of the window. Then after a few moments she turned when Jay still had not said anything and found him smiling. “So I would really like to get in touch with him. Is he a teacher? I hope so.”

“He is not a teacher,” Jay said smiling.

“But he is doing well?”

“That is what is believed.”

“What do you mean? Don’t you know?” Manasi was finding his smile pretty unnerving. “What does he do? Where does he live?”

Jay sat back in the chair and folded his arms, "You are looking at him."

"What?" What did he mean?

"Manasi, I am Deepu!"

"You are Deepu? You?" Manasi looked at him in amazement. "Really?" What was she saying? What kind of question was that?

"However hard it may seem to believe," Jay wasn't smiling anymore. In fact he seemed positively annoyed and possibly even angry. "I am the same person."

After a few moments, Manasi found her voice but not the right words, "Wow! But, How?"

"Not what you would have expected, obviously!"

It definitely was not what she would have expected. Or anyone else either. Jay Randive, CEO of a successful American software company was Deepu who she had known as Joshis' gardener? It was really a unique success story! Why did her incredulity annoy him so much?

Manasi smiled warmly and said, "It is difficult to believe. If I am not wrong, your ambition then, was to be a teacher. You had said you found it a big struggle in the new school and that you had trouble studying." She surprisingly remembered that well.

Her smile and tone seemed to go a long way in diminishing his annoyance. He visibly relaxed and said, "Joshi Kaka helped me with my studies. If it had not been for him, I might have dropped out of school in tenth itself."

"It must have meant a lot of hard work on your part too." She said looking at him curiously and trying to see traces of Deepu as he was in her memory. But she didn't find any. Deepu had been quiet, shy, hesitant lanky boy with sad eyes. Jay Randive looked tough and powerful. He didn't seem shy or hesitant about anything. He was said to be decisive and strident. His eyes were not sad anymore; they were hard and sharp! She almost felt sorry that Deepu had turned into Jay.

"But, it was only you and Mai." She said coming out of her thoughts. "On Friday you said you are here to search for Deepu's brother!"

"I had" he said, then stopped himself and corrected "I have a brother. Younger brother. Prakash."

"So where was he then? And now you need to carry out a search for him?"

“It is a long and complicated story,” he said shortly. Then he looked at his watch again and said, “Scott is flying back tomorrow and I need to spend some time with him going over the plans tonight.”

“Sure, of course!” Manasi said suddenly feeling as if she was being reprimanded for steering away from what should be her focus. But then she noticed that his expression was friendly.

He got up, “Let me know if I can work from here for the time that I am in India.”

“I don’t really see any reason why you shouldn’t be able to. But I need to run it by others,” she said. “I’ll email you by tonight.”

“Or you can call me. My local number is this,” He wrote it down on the white board on the wall.

She got up to accompany him back to the board room. But at the door she suddenly asked, “Where is Mai? How is she? On Friday you had said that you were going to the Tata hospital with your mother.” That time, she hadn’t realised that he was talking about Mai as she didn’t know he was Deepu.

He turned around and said, “She is OK now. Recovering. She is at my uncle’s place in a village called Adol.”

Tata hospital signified cancer. Mai had obviously been detected with some form of cancer. Was it detected in time? Was it curable? But before she could ask the question Jay said, “I would like to take you out to dinner tomorrow. If you are fine with it, of course. We can catch up on what has happened in our lives in the last twenty one years.”

“Yes, I would like that.” She said with a warm smile. She was very curious to know his story. She could hardly believe that the CEO of AccellaFab, that she had been trying to make a positive impression on, was actually Deepu!

“Great!” He said with a smile.

## CHAPTER TEN

Manasi managed to get away from work around 6:15. She was still trying to come to terms with what she had learnt. She was not able to think of Jay as Deepu. She got home and found Akka seated in the veranda with a shawl. She seemed to be looking at something in the garden keenly.

“What are you looking at Akka?” Manasi asked as she climbed into the veranda.

“There were a couple of birds here in the afternoon. But I can’t see them now,” Akka said. Then she got up slowly and walked inside the house with Manasi saying, “Do you want coffee? I am going to make some for myself.”

“OK. I would have a cup.” Manasi said. “Where is Mamma?” She didn’t see Anupama anywhere.

“She is in your father’s room watching the TV with him.”

Manasi was dying to talk to her mother about Deepu. “Should I check if she wants coffee too?”

“I know she does.” Akka replied.

“I’ll wash up and come down in a few minutes,” she called out and climbed the stairs to her room.

When she came back in a few minutes, Akka was at the dining table sipping her coffee. She pointed at the tray that held two cups and said, “You can take that in to your father’s room.” While Akka spent a lot of time in Upendra’s room, she never went there with any food; not even tea or coffee.

Manasi picked up the tray and said, “I hope he is in a good mood.”

Akka smiled and said, “He is. The physiotherapist told him today that he is doing very well.”

Manasi entered her father’s room with the tray and said, “Good evening” with a bright smile.

She was pleased to see both her parents smile in response. Her father patted his bed with his left hand and Manasi sat down by his side.

She sipped her coffee and turned to see what they were watching on the TV. It was a rerun of some Marathi serial. Her father was watching TV serials? That too Marathi TV serials? She was surprised at that. Before she could comment on that, her mother turned to look at him and said, “Should I

switch off?”

“Yesh,” Her father said almost clearly.

Anupama switched off the TV and turned her attention to the Manasi.

“I have something very interesting to tell you,” Manasi said.

“Whaf?” Her father asked with half a smile. He looked in a real good mood today.

She looked at him and then at her mother and said, “I asked Jay about Deepu.”

“Manu, the Sawai Gandharva festival started today. I am planning to go from tomorrow. Do you want to go with me?” Anupama rushed in.

Manasi looked at her mother in surprise and found her eyes on her. Manasi could not clearly read the look in her eyes but she seemed to be imploring as well as warning her not to go on. Manasi gave her a quick nod and said, “I can’t go tomorrow but I’ll join you on Saturday and Sunday.”

Anupama then turned to conversation to the physiotherapist’s visit and Upendra’s progress. Upendra was smiling a lot and he even said a few words. He showed Manasi how he was able to move his arm a little.

After Upendra was settled down for the night and Akka had retired to her room, Anupama asked Manasi to accompany her to her room. As soon as they got to Anupama’s room, she said, “Your father would have got upset if we had talked about Deepu.”

“Why? Does he even remember Deepu?”

“I think he would have remembered. When Deepu saved you, he had said I could give Deepu and Mai some money for saving you,” She gave a sad smile at that. “He didn’t like you and Rachu spending so much time with Deepu. He had categorically told me to watch Deepu around you and Rachana.”

“But why? What did Daddy have against him?”

“He just didn’t like Deepu’s look.” Anupama explained. “He said he couldn’t trust Deepu. He had come from a small village and was suddenly exposed to all of us who lead a much better, richer life than him. Upendra said he had seen this look in Deepu’s eyes; like he wanted to have that all for himself.”

“That might be true. Deepu has all that and more now!”

“You found out where he is and what he is doing?” Anupama asked with a pleased look.

“Yes I did. That is what I was going to tell you when you so effectively stopped me!”

“What does he do? He is here in Pune?”

“Mamma, you won’t believe it, but Jay Randive is Deepu!” Manasi said with a laugh.

“Your big client Jay? He is Deepu?” Anupama asked in amazement. She then sat down on the big double bed and looked at Manasi with stunned expression. “Oh my God! Are you sure?”

Manasi found herself laughing again, “Yes! Jay himself told me.”

“But how? I mean he was struggling to complete his 10th. Joshi Kaka used to work with him on many of his subjects. How did he end up as the CEO of a big American company?”

“He went to IIT and was hired by Microsoft. Then he founded AccellaFab with two other partners.” She felt proud of Jay, of his achievements. “He has asked me out for dinner tomorrow. I’ll ask him all this and more then,” she said with a smile.

“Why is he taking you out for dinner?”

“To catch up on the last 21 years.” She said with a big smile.

“Well, I...” Anupama started saying something but then she looked at Manasi’s raised eyebrows and her demeanor and interpreted correctly that she was waiting for Anupama to raise objections and was ready to argue, and she chose not to say anything. Instead she smiled and said, “So where are you going?”

Manasi was surprised at her mother’s tone and like a typical daughter, was right away suspicious. “We have not talked about that. But some place nice.”

They were both quiet for some time. Then going back to the earlier thread of conversation Manasi asked, “But after that incident, Rachu and I used to spend a lot of time with Deepu. He wouldn’t talk much earlier, but after that incident he used to. He used to ask us a lot of questions.” Now she could understand that the questions were because he was very new to the life in the city and everything was foreign to him.

“Mai and Deepu were struggling to adjust to the life here. Of course, Joshis

were very nice to them and that made it easier for them.” Anupama said reminiscently. Then she sighed and said, “It was a very sad period even in our lives.”

“Yes,” Manasi said sitting down next to Anupama and hugging her. She remembered her mother’s sorrow. She also remembered her grandmother’s helplessness. “I wish Daddy had visited us more then,” she said in a small voice.

“He too was very sad. He had wanted a son and after that second miscarriage the doctor told us very clearly that I should not get pregnant again,” Anupama’s voice was husky. “He was trying to cope.”

Manasi remembered how she used to wait for her father in those days. Whenever he visited them at her grandparents’ place, which was rare, he stayed for a very short time and he talked very little. It was as if he was just waiting to get away. He was unhappy, yes maybe. But he also was very angry all the time.

“He used to seem angry to me.” Manasi said.

Anupama laughed a humorless laugh and said, “He was always angry, not just then.” Then she looked up and Manasi could see the unshed tears shining in her eyes. But she smiled and said, “But now he has changed.”

“Yes. I have noticed.” Manasi acknowledged with a smile. She had seen him being different with her mother. But will that last? Or will he go back to being his old self once he recovered?

Next morning, in the office, Manasi was going through her email when she heard a knock on her door. She turned to look and then got up with a smile to open the door. Jay came in and said, “Good morning.”

“Is that office alright for you? Is the network point working?” She had talked to Vikram previous evening before going home and then messaged Jay that yes, he could work from NDS, in fact right from the next day.

“Yes. Thanks,” he said with a smile. “I came over to check how I can get coffee without having to call reception and order for it.”

“Oh!” Manasi shook her head and said, “Well, we have a pantry. But you can only get tea or coffee from a machine there.” Then she pointed at her sideboard and said, “I have this espresso maker. I keep a carton of milk in the

fridge and make my own coffee.” He looked around nodding and she continued, “You are welcome to use this.”

“OK,” he said presently. Then turning to look at her, he grinned and asked, “Any chance of getting some coffee right away?”

“Yes, sure! Have a seat, I’ll start it.” She added water from the water bottle and coffee from the glass jar next to the coffee maker and switched it on. Then she sat down in her chair and noticed that he was observing her with a smile.

His smile broadened when she looked at him and he said, “I was just remembering you from twenty-one years ago.”

That probably was not completely true but Manasi let it pass. “Where did you want to go for dinner? And what time?”

“You are the expert. You tell me where we can go. Some place where we can have a leisurely dinner and talk.”

She thought about that but couldn’t come up with a name right away and Jay said, “Or we could eat at my hotel. They have multiple restaurants. Are you a vegetarian?”

“Not really,” she replied.

By the time the coffee got ready they had agreed to meet at eight p.m. in one of the restaurants in the hotel where Jay was put up. “We’ll need to get the cups from the pantry,” Manasi said and opened the door of her office. Jay walked with her to the pantry and they got quite a few surreptitious looks from people who wanted to look completely absorbed in their work. In the pantry there were couple of people chatting with cups of tea in their hands and Manasi introduced Jay to them. More to make them feel at ease than to strictly observe the formality. Jay exchanged a few words with them and then said, “I’ll see you around.”

They got back to her office and Manasi felt relieved to fill his cup and send him on his way.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jay was in the lobby seated on a sofa next to the big glass wall near the hotel entrance. He watched Manasi get out of the car and the car pull away. As she entered the lobby, he got up and walked towards her. She was wearing gray trousers and a shell pink, Indian top with thread embroidery on it. She looked elegant and poised but not relaxed. She had been friendly this morning at work, but she had not dropped her guard. Even now, she was dressed appropriately for a dinner with an important customer, not casually enough for a dinner with an old friend.

Manasi entered the lobby and started walking towards the restaurant. She heard her name being called from behind, so she turned and saw Jay walking over from the other side of the lobby. He was dressed in jeans and a collared T-shirt; she was glad to see him dressed casually. She wished she had dressed in jeans and a casual top, as she had originally planned. But at the last minute, she had changed her mind remembering the advice that it was better to err on being formal than casual.

“Hi. Good evening,” She said and smiled when he came closer.

“Evening,” he replied. Then inclined his head and asked, “Shall we?”

They walked across to the restaurant in silence. The hostess dressed in a figure hugging dress was at her post just inside the restaurant entrance. “Good evening, Sir.” She smiled charmingly. Then she turned to Manasi. “Good evening, Madam.” She then walked them to a table all the way towards the other end, away from the entrance as well as the buffet setting.

“What would you like to drink?” Jay asked when they were seated. Then when she hesitated, he said, “I am going to have a glass of red wine.”

“OK, I’ll have red wine too,” Manasi replied.

Jay ordered the wine for both of them and then turned to Manasi with a smile. He needed her to relax and drop her guard. Only then would he be able to get her to talk openly about herself, her role at NDS and NDS in general. Talking about Microsoft could help establish common ground. “You worked with Microsoft, Scott was telling me.”

“Yes,” Manasi replied and then mentioned the group she had worked in.

“I know a few people there,” Jay said and mentioned a few names.

Manasi smiled, “You know the big bosses.” She sipped some water and

wished their wine would be served quickly. Then she could sip the wine instead and not make it obvious that she was nervous.

Jay was annoyed with himself! His intention in mentioning the names had been to point out common acquaintances. He didn't want her to think that he was in a different league. "It is the age factor." He said with a grin, "All the people I know are old, like me."

That worked. Manasi shook her head, smiled and said, "You don't think you are old, right?"

Jay said with half a smile, "Many people think of me as old and cynical."  
"Why?"

"Maybe because I am."

"Old? Or Cynical?" Manasi asked with a smile. Cynical? Why would he be cynical?

He didn't want to tell her that no matter what his age was in years, he sometimes felt very old. Or that he had to fight not to look at things cynically on many fronts. "I'll let you figure out on both counts," He replied with a cheeky smile.

"Ok." Manasi smiled a little. She didn't really know what to say. Though they were here to 'catch up' like old friends, he was practically a stranger. The last time she had chatted with him was when he was fifteen and she was eight. Both of them were different people today.

Jay smiled and was thinking what he should say next, when the waiter came with their wine. He carefully put the wine glasses in front of them and asked if they were ready to order the food. It didn't matter to Jay what they ordered, but he courteously asked Manasi. She deliberated on the type of cuisine and then guessing his preference correctly chose Indian.

Manasi's mind drifted to Deepu she used to know. She found herself looking at Jay's hands; they were hands of a rich man, big but well cared for, with a Rolex on his left wrist. She remembered how Deepu's hands used to be thin and how his nails used to be full of dirt many times. She considered how well dressed he was. Then she contrasted that with how he used to be dressed all those years ago when he tended the garden; he used to be in old, faded, patched up, trousers that were too big for him and a faded shirt that wasn't of any particular colour anymore.

She didn't remember their last meeting twenty one years ago but it must

have been in Joshis' garden or across the fence. She felt a strong urge to talk to the scrawny, unkempt and unlikely friend from all those years ago; not this sophisticated, powerful, confident stranger that was seated in front of her. But that friend was in her past. This stranger in front of her was her only link to that friend. She smiled a sad smile and said, "I remember meeting you for the first time all those years ago in Joshis' garden."

She had jumped right into the childhood! Jay now needed to steer the conversation so that he could get her to talk about her growing up years, her father, her job at Microsoft; basically about herself!

"Yes," He smiled warmly, letting himself go back in time to look at the naive, lost boy he had been; the boy that he had left behind long ago. "I was in the backyard when you had come out of Joshi Kaka's house looking for me." He thought about the sweet child she had been then.

"You used to work in the garden quite a lot then."

"That was the only thing I knew then."

"And you had told me that your ambition was to be a teacher."

He remembered that conversation well, even after all these years. It had been much after that attempted kidnapping incident. She used to talk to him even before the incident, but it used to be across the fence. Afterwards, she would go and sit in Joshis' veranda when he was studying there. She would bring her books and tell him that she would study with him. He was studying in a Marathi medium school and was struggling with English. But all her books were in English and she used to read them effortlessly. She would sometimes sing some English poems and songs. It had all fascinated him.

Just a couple of days before Manasi went back to her father's place, seated there in the veranda, she had asked him what he was going to be when he grew up and he had told her that he wanted to be a teacher. His father had been a teacher, a very well respected person of the village. Deepu wanted to be just like his father. Having lost his father just before coming to Pune, one thing that had kept him in the school and not drop out even when it had all seemed too much, was that ambition of becoming a teacher, just like his father.

"Yes." He said coming back to the present. "You had said you wanted to be an engineer, just like your father. That you would work in your father's factory and then you will be always with him."

“Yes, well, I became an engineer,” Manasi said titling her head to a side. “But then went to the US to do my MS and took up a job with Microsoft.” She didn’t plan to tell him that by her third year in the engineering college, she knew that she would never be able to work with her father. But taking up a job with another company would have meant big arguments with her father and a lot of heartache for her mother. So she had decided to do her post graduation in the US and then take up a job there itself.

“Where did you do your MS?” Even though he knew very well Jay asked, as that had to be the next logical question. She hadn’t mentioned how she had wanted to get away from her tyrannical father, but the investigator had already given him that information.

“UCLA.”

“Comp Science?”

“Yes,” She said with a nod. “Then got recruited in Microsoft.” She answered the question, but she didn’t want to talk about herself; she wanted to know about him. “You went to IIT Powai, I believe.”

“Yes.” He looked at the wine glass in his hand and said, “That would not have been possible without Joshi Kaka.” Then he looked up at her and gave her an enigmatic look before going ahead, “I became an engineer thanks to Joshi Kaka and you.”

“Me?” Manasi said incredulously.

He laughed a little and then said, “You had told me that you were going to be an engineer. I didn’t know what an engineer was at that time. But you had talked about it as if it meant a lot to you. You sparked an interest in me; I wanted to find out more. I asked Joshi Kaka after you went back and he explained it to me. He then said that the best place to do engineering was at IIT.”

“Well, the college of engineering in Pune was good for average students like me,” she said with an impertinent smile.

He gave throaty chuckle in response and said, “I am sure if you had wanted to go to IIT, you could have. I mean, if I could do it, you surely would have been able to!” Manasi looked at him curiously. What was he saying exactly? Jay interpreted her look accurately and answered the question she had not asked, “You know how I used to struggle with my studies. I got only 62% in my 10th. How much did you score?”

“94%”, Manasi told him. “But scoring good marks in the tenth is not difficult. You just need to know the likely questions and how to answer them to get good marks.”

“Getting through the IIT entrance is not very different,” he said. “Joshi Kaka worked with me relentlessly. He also made me join a class when I was in the 12th. He said, and he was right, that joining the class, I will learn how to solve the question papers in given time. I focused on the IIT entrance more than the 12th exams. I got only 77% in my twelfth, but scored really well on the entrance test and got into IIT Powai.”

Getting into IIT had not been easy, but his real challenge had been in fitting into the IIT culture. He had felt like an outcast. There were students from all over India and most of them were from urban middle class or well-to-do families. There were only couple others like him, who had come from rural background, who struggled with English and many references that others made whether about happenings in the world, the food or the TV shows or even how things worked in their families. IIT had been a culture shock and a real struggle to adjust, to fit in. Just like coming to Pune had been before that or going to US to join Microsoft had been after that.

Manasi’s voice brought him back to present. She was talking about Mai, “You mentioned going to the Tata hospital with Mai.”

“Yes, she was diagnosed with breast cancer sometime back, when she was with me in the US. She had four chemo sessions there in the US. But then she insisted on coming back to India. So we made an appointment at the Tata Hospital.”

Mai’s insistence of being back in India instead of with him had been difficult to accept. He felt deprived of the chance to be by her side when she needed support the most. After a lot of thought, he had decided to setup a base in Pune sooner than he had planned. He had been thinking about setting up a centre here and even identified NDS as the company he wanted to acquire. But after the ZipMake acquisition, he had planned to spend enough time on ZipMake before moving ahead with the India story. But Mai’s illness had hastened the pace. If he did it right away, instead of ten months or a year later, he could be with Mai here in Pune while she recovered or if she had to undergo more treatment. Pune was a city Mai had been familiar with; she had lived there for eight years till she went to live with her brother a year after Jay took up the job with Microsoft.

“How is she now?” Manasi was asking.

“She is quite well. We were fortunate to catch it early. And she responded well to the chemo therapy.” He curiously noticed the sincere concern in Manasi’s voice. “She might need couple more chemo sessions.”

“I would like to meet Mai,” Manasi said with a soft smile.

“Sure. She will come over sometime next month,” Jay told her.

“You will be here till then?”

“Yes, I will be. Let’s see how things shape up. Right now, someone else is running the show in the US, if that works out, I plan to spend time with Mai. In fact, I am looking at renting a place here in Pune so that Mai can come and stay with me,” he elaborated.

Manasi nodded and smiled warmly. She felt a kinship with him; like her, he was here to take care of an unwell parent. She should ask him about his brother. And why was Jay called Deepu all those years ago anyway?

“Does Mai call you Jay now?”

“No,” He said with a chuckle. “She calls me Deepu, she always has.”

They both got quiet as a waiter came and served their food. When he left, Manasi looked at the food on her plate and felt pleased. She looked across at Jay and smiled, “Everything looks good!”

Jay smiled at her tone, it reminded him of eight year old Manasi. “Yes, it does.”

Manasi tasted everything and appreciated each preparation. Then, after a few seconds, she asked him, “When did you change your name?”

Jay shook his head, “I didn’t. I only shortened it. In school and IIT, I used Dhananjay Randive. But when I went to the US, I found that people struggled with Dhananjay, so I shortened it to Jay.” Then he smiled thinking about his conversation with Bindu about it and said, “A friend of mine suggested it actually.”

“But then Mai called you Deepu and so did everyone else, when I knew you.”

“My official name, the one used in school was Dhananjay. My nick name, the name used at home was Deepak, which got shortened to Deepu. My father and Mai always called me Deepu.”

Manasi looked at the big man seated in front of her, talking about that

scrawny friend from long ago. He had stopped talking and was looking at her with half a smile. "What was that about search for your brother? You didn't have a brother." The last part came out as a statement rather than a question.

"I did. I mean, I do. I hope..." he said and looked away. Even after all these years, the memories were painful. That is why he avoided thinking about it as much as possible. But Manasi was looking at him with an earnest expression; there was sincere interest and concern in her eyes. "Pakya, my younger brother," he hated that his voice sounded so gruff. He sipped some wine and then continued, "my brother went missing after my father was killed in our village." He managed to tell her with a flat tone.

Manasi knew his father had died in a scuffle between two castes just before Mai and he had come to Pune. But his younger brother had gone missing then? "Gone missing in the village? I am sure you must have looked for him everywhere!" Manasi felt a wave of sympathy for Jay. And for Mai. Was it possible that Prakash too was killed?

"Of course! We looked everywhere we could think of." He said, "Then we realised that he had probably felt guilty and run away. So we waited for him to come home, but he never did." Few days after his father died, the village sarpanch, who was his father's good friend suggested that Mai and Deepu leave the village, because though the fighting between the two castes had stopped, the animosity continued. He, the sarpanch felt that both the castes would make life difficult for Mai and Deepu. He told them that he will inform them when Prakash came back."

Manasi felt disconcerted by the story. "He felt guilty? For what?"

Jay looked at her and she seemed to be quietly willing him to go on. Then he sighed and said, "My father was a teacher in the local school at Hatmali, our village. A well wisher had come home to warn my father about a group from one of the two clashing castes discussing how my father was meddling and that he had to be taken care of. At the time, my father had gone to talk to the leader of the other caste. He was actually trying to get both the groups to calm down and discuss the issue, instead of attacking each other and burning each others' huts and shops.

"Mai couldn't go herself, so she decided to send Pakya. Since his exams were over, he was playing somewhere near our home. She found him with few other boys and told him to go and call my father immediately. He told her he would go, but he dilly dallied, like children do. She yelled at him to go

and said if he didn't go our father would be in big trouble. Finally he did go looking for my father about fifteen minutes later. But it was too late."

Jay looked at Manasi's stunned expression and found himself going ahead and telling her even more, "Couple of people told us later that Pakya had probably reached the site just when my father was attacked. We don't know for sure, because he never came home after that."

They had both stopped eating. Jay realised that this should not be a dinner table conversation. He cursed himself for bad manners and then said, "I am sorry about bringing this up. I didn't mean to spoil your dinner."

Manasi looked at him in shock. He was worried about spoiling her dinner? "I don't mind. Really. I am glad you told me. And I am sorry to hear what happened to your father and brother."

Jay bowed his head slightly to acknowledge her graciousness and then slowly started eating. Manasi followed his example, to make him feel better, wondering about the complex man facing her. A man that people described as predatory, strident, ruthless capitalist was the man who wanted to be with his mother as she went through her treatment. A man, who was assumed to be powerful and confident was the man who felt he had to apologize to her for talking about the dreadful things he and his family had faced, at the dinner table.

After few moments of silence, Manasi asked him, "Where were you when they attacked your father?"

He stopped eating and said, "I was writing the last paper of my 9th class in Kalamduri." The village school was only till 7th. For higher classes children had to go to the Taluka place, Kalamduri. Jay had returned to Hatmali that afternoon to find a big crowd outside his home. He didn't know what was going on, but it was a quiet gathering, with everyone looking really grim and he had known something was terribly wrong.

With effort he pulled himself out of the painful memories and looked at the poised woman seated in front of him. In some ways, she reminded him of the sweet child who had unknowingly helped him cope with his pain and sorrow more than twenty years ago. But he was not going to let that play on his mind and distract him from his aim.

"That was a long time ago," he said looking at her with half a smile. He had meant to get her to talk about herself and ended up telling her about



himself instead! He will have to make better effort to not think of her as the eight year old child; she was not that child anymore! “So, when did you leave Microsoft and come back to India?”

Manasi had stopped eating, which she now resumed. Then she told him about how her father had suffered a stroke and she had to step in. “I came back in May and have been working as stand-in CEO for NDS since then.” She shook her head, looked up at him with a smile and continued, “I was working as a Development Lead at Microsoft. That is what I understood. Being a CEO of an Indian services company was a completely different ball game!”

Jay looked at her and grinned, “Oh I am sure. But Scott as well as Chris was all praise for the changes you have brought in.”

“Well, I could see what needed to be done; it was all related to product development, which I understood well. But implementing those changes, getting the people to do things differently; that has been a big struggle. I am just glad we were able to turn the ZipMake project around. But I need to do that for some other projects as well. And I have not even looked at the support functions.” She sipped some wine expecting him to say something, but he didn’t, and so she herself said, “As you saw, we are not doing things the way they need to be done.”

Jay saw his chance and said, “You need people with right attitude. Your HR manager is really stuck up,” then he looked at her and said, “Pardon my language. But you need someone more willing to look at things with different perspective and willing to listen to others. Am I right in assuming that everyone has trouble working with her?”

Manasi looked down at her plate and then didn’t know why she was hesitating anymore. Jay was a friend, and an experienced friend at that. He would be able to help her. She had been looking for someone who could guide her on various fronts and so far didn’t find anyone who she could turn to! In fact, it was good that he was going to be working from Pune, from NDS itself for sometime. She could talk to him, discuss issues, run ideas by him.

She looked up, smiled and said, “You are correct in your assumption. Niranjana continues to have issues with her and I struggle a lot to get her to listen. Everything, even something that I think should be simple and straight forward, becomes a big argument when she is involved. And many times I

have to hear that NDS didn't do things the way I was suggesting and that in my father's day, something like what I want would never have been done!"

Jay was glad that Manasi was opening up and discussing the NDS problems with him, but he steered the conversation away from the specific problem. "I am sure, you didn't envision issues like this, when you took over," he said with a sympathetic smile.

"True. You know, my uncle, I mean my father's cousin used to run NDS till a few years ago. Then he took up a job in Australia and migrated. Since then my father was the one at the helm. But I now realise that he should have hired someone else with the right background." With a piece of Naan in her hand, she suddenly became aware that her plate didn't have any curry or dal left on it. She had been so absorbed that she had not been looking at what she was eating.

Jay too became aware of the fact when she stared at her empty plate in amazement. He looked at his own plate and then signalled the waiter standing at the serving station. When he looked back at the table, Manasi had started serving herself. He looked at the waiter hurrying over and gestured him to serve them. Jay felt better when Manasi relinquished the serving part to the waiter. Once the waiter left, he asked, "What do you plan to do now? I mean, you plan to stay put and run NDS or are you planning to hire someone?"

"For now, I think I'll run it. At least till a point where I am confident enough to hand over to a new person. Too many changes at the top in quick succession will not be good." Then she wrinkled her nose and said, "Plus, my father is not easy to convince. He will find it difficult to accept a new person in his place."

"How is he doing? Do you think he will recover fully and be able to come back to work full time?"

Manasi didn't have an answer to the second question, but she answered the first one, "He is improving; for some period in between it had seemed that the progress had stagnated. But now, he is improving practically everyday. Today, he is able to speak better than even two weeks back."

Jay nodded. Thanks to his investigation into NDS, he had learnt that she had been engaged to be married. But he didn't see an engagement ring on her finger and didn't know how to turn conversation towards that subject. He tried with, "Was it difficult to leave your job and come back? It must have been a sudden, unplanned change."

Manasi nodded and smiled a sad smile, “When my mother called about the stroke, it was horrible! The 38 hours it took me to get here and to see my father, I think have been the worst in my life!” Jay looked at the remembered pain in her eyes but didn’t say anything; he didn’t want to interrupt her. “Then we decided that the only possible solution for NDS was for me to come back.”

“There was no one who could run it? Someone senior at NDS?”

“The board disapproved of Niranjana. Then, my mother suggested my name and funnily, they were OK with me. That of course didn’t go well with Niranjana. It continues to bother him. It is only in last few weeks that he has been amiable.”

“So you quit your job and came back.”

“My manager had suggested taking a long leave. But after a lot of consideration, I decided to quit.” She was done with food. She sipped some water and then said, “I have a standing offer from my manager; anytime I was to go back, he will take me on the team.” There was pride in her voice when she said that.

Jay knew she had been doing well at Microsoft; this last statement of hers confirmed that once again.

“Do you think you will go back?” He asked; he really wanted to know what she planned to do.

She sighed and said, “My fiancée works in a startup in the Puget sound,” she also mentioned the name of the company. It was a startup working on web application for realty. “We would have been married by now, if it had not been Daddy’s stroke and then my coming here to take over NDS.”

“Who is the lucky guy?” Jay asked with a genuine smile. Her fiancée was definitely a lucky guy!

“Rakesh Dangey,” Manasi said and then she wrinkled her nose once again, “I don’t know whether he is really the lucky one. Last six months haven’t been easy.” Then she told him about Rakesh. Rakesh was couple of years older than Manasi and like her, he too had gone to the US to do his MS and then got a job in a company in the Bay area. He had moved to the Puget Sound area two and half years ago. “We got engaged last year,” Manasi ended with a smile.

Jay looked at her and hoped that this Rakesh guy knew how lucky he was.

“So when do you folks plan to tie the knot now?” He asked.

“We need to decide that. I am going to need some more time here at NDS and Rakesh is in the US, so there is no point in getting married when we have to live so far away from each other. But he is coming over for a vacation.”

Jay listened to the wistful note in her voice and thought that taking over NDS might not be too difficult. Her father was in no condition to come back to run the show and she obviously wanted to be with Rakesh. If he could convince that NDS would be in good hands, that it actually would be a good thing for the employees, then it actually might be quite smooth. Of course, he needed her to continue running NDS for a few months; till he could have his plans for the Indian products ironed out. So he had enough time to think and put the takeover plan in action .

He came out of his contemplation and heard Manasi say, “I’ll introduce you.”

He nodded. He was curious about the guy.

“What about you? How have you avoided marriage so long?” Manasi asked. Then before he could say anything, she smiled, “I mean, how come Mai has not pestered you about it?”

“Oh, she pesters me alright!” he said dryly.

Manasi understood that he didn’t want to really talk about it and left it alone. She asked about Prakash and the search instead. “So, your brother, you are planning to run a search now?”

They had both done with their food, and noticing that, a waiter came over to clear the table.

“Would you like some dessert sir?” The waiter asked and Jay looked at Manasi.

“Not for me,” She declined.

Jay didn’t want to end their meeting yet, “How about some coffee?”

Manasi agreed to that and the waiter left with their order.

Coming back to their conversation Jay said, “You were asking about Prakash. So, as you can imagine, it is very difficult to look for a person who went missing as a small child more than twenty years ago. It is such an old case, that police won’t now start looking for someone who went missing more than twenty one years ago. So, I have hired a private detective firm for

the job.”

Manasi thought of many questions about that but didn't ask any. After a pause, Jay said, “Well, after he went missing, we did register a complaint but of course nothing happened. Then, Mai and I left Hatmali and came to Pune. After that we asked the sarpanch regularly about Prakash. Mai kept asking even after I went to the US.”

Manasi didn't say anything, but nodded sympathetically. That was encouragement enough for Jay to go on, “She has gone to numerous holy men to ask about him. She would do everything that was asked of her; fasting, getting up before dawn, bathing in river at odd hours; praying to certain god or goddess; whatever the holy man she was visiting told her to do. Based on what the holy men told her, she has even gone looking for him in strange places. My uncle, her brother accompanied her on these trips. After meeting a new holy man, she would be very hopeful for a while. Then after a while she would realize that this remedy too has failed and she would go through a bout of depression. After a while, someone would tell her about another holy man and her hopes would be raised again.”

“It must be so difficult for her,” Manasi said softly.

“Yes,” Jay agreed. It was difficult to see Mai go through it again and again. But it also made him angry every time she went to a new holy man. Then when she was diagnosed with cancer, she had pleaded with Jay to find Prakash. She had felt she was dying and had said that if there was just one thing she really wanted; just one thing she wished Jay would do for her then she wanted him to find Prakash. He didn't know how to go about it. But he promised Mai that he would try his best.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

On Saturday, Manasi told Anupama about her dinner conversation. Anupama listened quietly and then smiled, though she was teary eyed, “They went through so much pain. We didn’t even know then.” Then she said what Jay had achieved was truly admirable. Manasi couldn’t agree more. But when Manasi suggested that they invite Jay over once, Anupama was not very keen. She said, “We’ll see.”

Manasi then told Upendra about Jay; she didn’t want to keep him in the dark. Especially since Jay would be working from NDS now. He said he was not pleased at all. He said, he remembered the kid and he had not liked the look in his eyes. But he didn’t argue with Manasi about letting him work from NDS. That was quite surprising.

On Sunday, Manasi had a long conversation with Rachana and told her about Jay. But Rachana didn’t quite remember Deepu and so she didn’t share the incredulity experienced by Manasi.

On Sunday, Manasi had a skype call with Rakesh and she could not help talk about Jay being someone she knew in her childhood. Rakesh’s reaction was one of complete disbelief. Then he asked her if she was sure or if Jay was pretending to be someone she knew so that her opinion about him would be favorable. “You know what he is like, don’t you Manasi?” He asked. “He is a merciless businessman. His reputation is also not good where women are concerned.” He pointed out. He was not telling her anything new, but somehow, Manasi could not see Jay like that anymore, but she didn’t tell Rakesh that. “You just be careful,” Rakesh ended the call on that warning note.

On Monday, Manasi reached NDS around nine and as she walked across the work hall towards her cabin, she saw that Jay was already seated in the cabin allocated to him. When she knocked on the door, he looked up from the laptop. His expression cleared on seeing her and smilingly he gestured her to enter. She opened the door and said, “Good morning.”

“Morning, Manasi. Good weekend?”

Manasi couldn’t help smile at how typically American it sounded.

“It was good. How about you?”

“Yes,” he said shortly.

“You wear Glasses?” She asked looking at his spectacles. She didn’t remember any of his pictures with glasses.

“They are anti glare,” he smiled taking them off.

“I stopped by to ask you if you wanted some coffee. I will switch on the coffee maker.”

“That would be great,” he replied. “I’ll come over in a few minutes.”

Manasi started the coffee maker and opened her laptop while it worked. She was going through her emails when Jay knocked on her cabin door about ten minutes later. When he sat down across her table, she poured coffee in two mugs, gave him one and added milk and sugar to her. She stood by the side table, stirring the coffee, lost in her thoughts.

“You look troubled,” Jay remarked after a few moments of silence.

Manasi looked up and said, “Something in my emails.” Then thinking that he might be able to help, she asked, “Do you have a few minutes? If I could talk to you about this...”

“Sure. What is it?” He sounded genuinely concerned.

Manasi sighed and sat down in her chair. Then after a sip she said, “It is Chandrika. I have got a long mail from her about how we are handling people all wrong and how things were different in my father’s time.”

“I said this earlier too, you need someone with better attitude in that place. How long has she been with NDS? Could you give her another role and bring someone else to head that function?”

Bring in a new HR head? Manasi had expected some kind of advice on how to handle Chandrika.

“She has been with NDS for a long time and she is someone my father trusts completely. He has known her from the time she used to work in a company owned by his friend.”

Jay nodded but didn’t voice any opinion on that. He looked at Manasi and sipped his coffee. Manasi said shaking her head, “I don’t know what other role she can play; and I can’t see myself asking her to leave NDS.”

Jay put down his mug and sat up. Then casually said, “You don’t have to ask her to leave. Think up a role; tell her it is going to be very important for

NDS. Then ask her to detail out that role and its responsibilities. Being in HR, she should be able to do this. If she can do a good job of that, you can tell her you need her to play that role. It would be her chance to show flexibility and positive attitude.” Manasi was listening attentively. “In the mean time, for the HR itself, it might make sense to bring in someone with at least a few years experience in that function.”

Manasi fidgeted with the coffee mug in her hand, “I don’t think we can afford to keep Chandrika and bring in another senior person.”

“Manasi, at it’s present level, NDS can’t afford not to have the right person steering the HR function,” Jay stated gravely.

Manasi sighed and looked around, not saying anything for a while. Jay didn’t say anything either. Then Manasi said in a small voice, “What role can we ask Chandrika to play? It has to be a senior role and an important one.”

Jay nodded, “Do you have a full fledged training function and a head of training?”

“No,” Manasi said slowly.

“Think about it,” Jay said. After a few moments of silence, he got up. When Manasi looked at him, he smiled, “It might seem difficult, but in the long run, you would be solving a lot of problems.”

Manasi nodded and then got up. At the door, he turned and said, “By the way, I have a few meetings with manufacturing companies this week. For couple of those, where we are going to talk about their requirements and challenges, I was hoping to involve you.”

“Sure!” Manasi said. “Let me introduce you to Mayank today. I think we should involve him too.”

Manasi kept thinking about what Jay had said throughout the day and then decided to talk to Vikram about it. As she deliberated on what Jay had suggested, she had to agree that having the right person heading their HR function was important and that Chandrika was not that person.

The next day, she went over to Vikram. After they talked about the different accounts and their finances, Manasi casually said, “One thing that bothered me from AccellaFab’s visit was how we ended up looking weak in terms of HR.”

Vikram sat up and said, “Yes. And the questions asked by Jay seemed



reasonable to me. They would want to know these things if they are planning to work with us on a bigger scale.”

“That they are, I think.” She then went ahead to tell him about Jay’s plan about making software products for Indian manufacturers and involving NDS in the same.

“That is good news.” Vikram said but he didn’t look overjoyed. Manasi could guess that he was wondering whether their Indian business will be affected. So she explained what Jay had told her and that helped alleviate Vikram’s concern.

Then Manasi came back to the topic she wanted to discuss, “Coming back to HR, may be it is time to make changes in the leadership of that function.”

Vikram looked at her steadily for a few moments and then said, “I couldn’t agree more. In fact, I had suggested a HR manager with the right background to Upendra on multiple occasions. But Upendra didn’t agree. He had strong faith in Chandrika.”

Manasi detected a sardonic note when he said the last statement. “But we can’t ask Chandrika to go right?” She asked.

Vikram smiled mirthlessly, “I guess not.”

“Let us figure out a role, maybe a completely new one, for her. We can ask her to detail out that role. As for HR, let us define the role clearly and start recruitment efforts.”

As Manasi was about to leave, Vikram said, “You will need to talk to Upendra before putting this in action. We can’t make changes involving Chandrika, I mean HR, without keeping him in the loop.”

Manasi was taken aback by this. She had not expected Vikram to take such a stand. What was he concerned about? She also was not pleased by the way he was saying it. It seemed to imply that Chandrika was in some way ‘special’ to her father as more than an employee. She didn’t like the sound of it all. She made an effort not to react to all that and said firmly, “Don’t worry about that. I will talk to him.”

In the next couple of days, she talked about more issues with Jay. He suggested letting Niranjana go as he was damaging the morale in the group. She was very reluctant to do that and said as much. When they had discussed it for considerable time, Jay pointed out to her that she was practically

spending as much time on Niranjana's projects as Niranjana was. And she was spending at least half as much time in arguing with Niranjana.

The next issue was about the finance & accounts team - a lot of people had complaints about their behavior. They were rude; they answered any query as if they were doing a favor; they didn't communicate and so on. "You can't tell me, we need to let Vikram go!" Manasi said after explaining the issue.

Jay laughed at her agitation and said, "No. I won't. What I am hearing is that they are good at their job but don't know how to communicate. They need to be treating engineering groups as their customers and that does not seem to be happening."

It was Wednesday evening and they were once again seated in Manasi's office. Jay suggested communication training for the team in question and then said, "In fact, it might be a good idea to do some leadership trainings for your project managers and above."

He was telling her all these solutions so easily. But all of them would cost a lot. That of course was not his problem.

As if he understood the direction of her thoughts, he said, "It will cost you of course. But look at it as an investment. And you don't have to do everything all at once!"

Manasi found herself nodding and then looked outside the window. The Sun was low on the horizon and it felt like the stage was all set for its grand exit. She kept looking at the sky, mesmerized. After a few moments of silence, Jay said, "Lost in thoughts?"

Manasi turned around to look at him and realised that he was not looking at the sky at all. "Look at the horizon. Isn't it beautiful?"

Jay looked at her in surprise and then turned his attention to the sky outside the window. They watched quietly till the Sun set and it started getting dark outside. Then Manasi turned around and smiled at Jay. He seemed a little disoriented but his expression cleared quickly and he said, "Very nice."

Manasi then asked, "So have you started the search for your brother?"

"Not yet. I have been talking with the detectives about how we can go about it."

Manasi nodded, "You said these are private detectives right? How did you know which ones to work with?"

"I went with recommendations from people I know."

“Have you considered...” Manasi left off, unsure of how to say it or how it will sound to Jay.

“What?”

“I mean, I don’t mean to sound negative or discourage you. But have you thought about the possibility that he might have... you know... been killed in the scuffle?” She finally voiced what had been on her mind for a few days. Then she looked at Jay to see if it had upset him.

Jay looked calm and shaking his head, said, “His body was never found. It can’t just vanish, you know.” He picked up a pen from her table and flipped it round and round in his fingers. Then he put it down and said, “The thing with this search though is, if we don’t find him, how long do we keep looking for him? I mean, Mai would not want us to give up. And there is a very high possibility that however much we try, and whatever ways we adopt, we might not be able to find him. So do we give up after some time? Or keep looking?”

Manasi felt like saying, ‘Don’t worry. I am sure, you will be able to find him,’ but knowing the circumstances, just could not bring herself to voice that.

On Friday, Manasi and Mayank accompanied Jay for meetings with two different manufacturers in Pune. One was a two wheeler manufacturer, the other a manufacturer of spare parts for Tata Motors. Mayank asked a lot of questions and managed to impress Jay. On their way back, Manasi seated in the front seat, next to Arun Kaka keenly listened to the conversation taking place on the back seat between Jay and Mayank. But after some time, when she realised that the two men were quite comfortable with each other and there was an easy flow to their conversation, her mind wandered. She looked out the window thinking to herself that Jay might be a ruthless businessman, but his interactions with people were very cordial. She had noticed in last few days at NDS that while he didn’t go out of his way to talk to people, he didn’t avoid them either. In the pantry or in the cafeteria, when he came across people, he was cordial. He was not aloof and he didn’t have any airs about who he was.

She came out of her thoughts when she heard Mayank said, “Manasi, would you like to join?”

She had no clue what they were talking about. She looked at both of them blankly and said, “Sorry, I couldn’t catch that.”

Jay smiled and said, “She switched off when we started talking about motorbikes, I think.”

“Jay and I are going to a pub this evening. I was asking if you would like to join,” Mayank said with a smile.

Manasi thought about it; the two were obviously comfortable enough to plan an outing to a pub. It would be a good idea to let that develop; it will be beneficial to have Jay see Mayank as someone he can trust and depend on. “I am sorry, but I won’t be able to join this evening.” She can go out with her friends instead; something she had not done in a long time...

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jay opened his eyes once more and checked the time. 3:23 a.m. He sighed and got up. He had returned from the pub just after midnight. Then he had talked to Danny and the conversation had gone on for almost an hour. He was pleased with the way Danny was managing things. In the past ten days, he had taken some good decisions and won a big opportunity against stiff competition. Jay didn't have any reason to worry about the business operations; he could focus on setting up the India operations without the anxiety about that.

He had gone to bed feeling pleased, but sleep had not been kind. He had been tossing and turning for past two hours.

Manasi was making it too easy for him. She talked to him about NDS matters openly; asked his suggestions and advice. She introduced him to many from the company and let him talk to them independently. He had expected her to accompany Mayank and him to the pub; but she had declined. Did she not realise the danger of her actions? Did she not think about the possibility that Jay might decide to setup his own operation and hire away her talent? Had she not thought about him wanting to acquire NDS?

Even if Jay decided to leave NDS alone; not think about the acquisition and not plan to hire their talent away; someone else was bound to, sooner or later! Sooner than later! Did she not realise it at all? Why did she trust him so completely? And what about the others? How did Vikram not think about it? Or the board?

The board probably did not know how much information Manasi was sharing with Jay. Did Vikram know?

He was reasoning with himself about how someone was bound to move in for a kill due to Manasi's carelessness. The other side of the argument that his mind kept presenting had only one point; that she was sharing so much with him, asking his advice and letting him meet people freely because she was looking at him as her friend now. She was no longer dealing with him as an important customer; he was now a trusted friend. Wasn't that what he had wanted to achieve?

He got up annoyed with himself and opened the small refrigerator in the hotel room. He picked up the two small Smirnoff bottles and a bottle of club soda. He poured the two in a glass and took it to the living area of the suite.

He sat down in the recliner, turned on the TV and switched different channels but didn't find anything that he felt like watching.

"Oh damn it!" he cursed.

She was no longer an eight year old child! And he was not the fifteen year old boy she had known as her friend! She should know better than to trust him blindly. Hadn't she learnt even this in her life? She was supposed to be a good development lead at Microsoft. She was an intelligent woman. How could she trust him so easily? What made her trust him so completely? Did she not know his reputation? Was there no one warning her about him?

He took a large swig and then another one. He put down the glass on the small table next to the recliner and ran his hands through his hair.

He was upset with himself too! He was getting a lot of information on NDS; he had managed to get Manasi to initiate changes in the leadership of important functions and restructuring of the engineering groups. This would be his easiest acquisition. Why was he letting this bother him so much? Why was he upset that Manasi was making the takeover easy for him?

Manasi was making the mistake of treating him as a trusted friend. But wasn't he also thinking of her as a friend? Wasn't that why he was in this turmoil?

He had had no qualms about hiring people in US who had come over to work at AccellaFab on contract from vendor companies. He should just stop thinking of Manasi as the child he had known long ago and look at her as the head of NDS, a vendor providing him services.

He would offer the employees a better salary and perks that a services company like NDS would not be offering. He would offer them better insurance and more vacation. His stock option plan would be more attractive than NDS's.

When his glass got empty, he ordered more alcohol from the room service. When there was knock on the door few minutes later, he put the robe given by the hotel and tied the belt before opening the door. A waiter stood outside the door with a tray in his hand. Jay moved aside and the waiter came in.

"Where should I put this sir?"

Jay indicated the center table in the living area. Jay let go of the door and walked across to the living room. He sat down in the recliner and the waiter handed him the bill to sign. Jay put it on the table and as he bent down to

sign, the hand with which he was holding the bill slipped on the table. As he went to balance himself, he knocked the club soda bottle. The bottle shattered and a piece slashed into the side of Jay's left hand.

"Oh fuck!" he said looking at his hand.

The waiter had got flustered. "I am so sorry sir!" he said looking almost scared.

It was not the waiter's fault at all. Jay held his left hand tightly with his right and got up. He looked at the waiter's expression and said, "It is OK."

He walked into the bathroom and held the injured hand under the cold water tap in the wash basin. The waiter came over and hovered in the bathroom door. Jay turned off the tap and looked at his hand. It was still bleeding and not a very small cut. He turned to look at the waiter and said, "Can you ask for some sticking plaster?"

"Yes sir, of course!" waiter said rushing out to make the phone call. Jay came out of the bathroom and went to sit in the recliner. The waiter said, "Sir, they will bring it right away."

Jay nodded and went to pick up the bill to sign. "It is OK sir, let us get your hand bandaged first," the waiter said.

Jay smiled a little and said, "Don't you need to get back?"

"It is OK sir. At night generally there is not a lot of rush."

Jay indicated the sofa and said, "Why don't you sit down then?"

"No, it is OK sir," the waiter said almost embarrassed.

"I insist. Please sit down."

Very reluctantly, the waiter sat down on the edge of the chair. Jay tried to read the name plate on the waiter's left pocket but could not; it was too small. So he asked, "What is your name?"

"Prakash."

Jay nodded but his name stirred something in him. He looked at the waiter carefully. He looked about thirty and had a dark complexion. He was about 5 to 6 inches shorter than Jay so he must be about 5 ft and 7 to 8 inches tall.

"How long have you been working at this hotel?"

"Three years, sir."

"Are you from Pune itself?" Jay knew he was being too inquisitive, but he couldn't help it.

“No sir. I am from Latur. But now in Pune for last ten years.” The waiter didn’t seem to mind the questions or have any inhibitions about answering them.

They heard a knock on the door and waiter got up to open the door. The house keeping guy too came in and with his help, Prakash proceeded to bandage Jay’s hand. The house keeping guy left and Prakash was about to when Jay said, “I would like something to eat. Something light, what do you suggest?” He was not particularly hungry, but he wanted to talk a little more with Prakash.

Prakash suggested sandwiches, Jay agreed and Prakash went to get the same for Jay. When he got back, as he was setting up the tray on the center table, Jay asked him, “So is your family here or in Latur?”

“My wife and daughter is here sir. My parents are in Latur.”

“What does your father do?” Jay found himself asking.

“He is a postman, sir.”

After Prakash left, Jay nibbled at the sandwich and drank his whiskey in an introspective mood. Just because the waiter’s name was Prakash, he had ended up chatting with him and asking him questions. Actually not just because of the name; it was the combination of the name, his complexion and his age. Would he recognise Pakya if he came face to face with him? Will Pakya recognise him?

The search was starting on Sunday. Neil Bhargav would be sending his detectives out to Hatmali and other villages close by. The detectives will try to find out if anyone knew anything; if anyone remembered anything. Jay would give anything to be able to find Prakash, but he didn’t have much hopes of actually finding him.

As he walked over to the bed and shrugged off the robe, he again thought about Manasi and NDS. What was he going to do? He didn’t have a plan, but he was feeling relaxed and drowsy; he should be able to fall asleep now.

By Monday, Jay knew what he was going to do about NDS. Over the weekend, he had also managed to find a good bungalow on rent, very close to where Joshi kaka was staying now and spent some time with Joshi kaka. So



when he reached NDS at nine on Monday, he was in a very good mood. He would talk to Manasi now, over coffee. He would ask her if she would consider selling NDS to the right buyer. He would then guide the conversation to define the right buyer, and then ask her what if he was to take over NDS as is. He would pitch it such that it would seem like a solution to her; a close friend taking over NDS; a friend she had been asking advice from.

He would get her to see how it would be to her advantage; she could then get married and go to the US; and the terms will be fair to all concerned, including the employees. Why would she have any objection to this at all? All he had to do is first get her to realise that she should look for a buyer and then point out that he would be the right buyer.

He kept his laptop in the cabin and then went over to Manasi's office, but she was not in yet. He checked again after half an hour, but she still was not there. When she wasn't there even at 10:15, he called the reception and asked when Manasi was expected.

"Sir, she had gone to the airport to receive her would-be. She has said, she'll try to come over in the afternoon!" The receptionist informed him in a cheerful voice.

Of course! Rakesh must have reached this morning. Manasi had talked to Jay about it but in his eagerness to openly have the conversation about buying NDS with Manasi, it had slipped his mind. She had also said that she would be going to Aurangabad with Rakesh. So he will have to wait till she got back from Aurangabad now.

By 11:00 a.m. he was feeling in dire need of a cup of strong coffee. Manasi had said he could use the coffee maker in her office, but he couldn't bring himself to do that in her absence. He walked out to the reception and found Vikram there, seated on the sofa reading the Economic Times. He apparently had time on his hand, so Jay asked him to join him for a coffee and Vikram agreed. They walked to a nearby coffee shop for a quick coffee but ended up spending over an hour.

Vikram was watchful to start with. But then he realised that Jay was not asking anything that he should avoid talking about and relaxed.

"When your CEO collapsed, it must have been a big shock and then a huge challenge to you and others at NDS," Jay said when they got talking about how things changed all the time and how one has to be ready to adapt.

“When the board agreed to let Manasi come in as the CEO, I had my doubts. But today I think that her coming in was the best thing to happen at NDS in a long time! It is just sad that it had to be because of Upendra’s illness.” Vikram said in reply.

Jay was pleased to know that Vikram admired what Manasi had done for NDS. She had taken on a huge challenge; jumping in to take on responsibilities in difficult times, when she had background only in engineering. From his conversations with her, he had got to know that she had a lot of trouble with some of the senior leaders in NDS, so it was good to see a strong supporter in NDS’s CFO.

“NDS was lucky that she decided to step in,” Jay said with a smile. “I mean, she also kept her personal plans on hold to do that, didn’t she?” He asked referring to her postponed wedding. How did Vikram feel about that?

Vikram sighed, “Yes. She had to postpone her wedding.” He sipped his coffee quietly for a few moments and then said, “Rakesh is here now on vacation and she will be spending time with him. They need to decide what they are going to do. In my opinion, long distance relationships don’t really work.”

“So what is your advice to her?” Jay asked with a smile, very casually, as if he was just asking since they were on the topic. But he was very eager to know what Vikram felt about it and if he would be talking to Manasi about it.

“I would not advise her on it but I think she needs to choose between NDS and her relationship. For sake of NDS, I hope she would choose NDS.” Vikram looked away at that.

Jay would have liked to talk more on the topic, but then it would not have remained a casual conversation and so he dropped the subject.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Manasi looked at Rakesh seated opposite her at the dining table and smiled. He had been really pleased to see her waiting at the airport. They had reached home at dawn and after having tea with Akka and Anupama, Manasi had walked Rakesh to the study that was setup as the guest room for his stay. He had then taken her in his arms and kissed her passionately. They could not do more than that of course, but it had felt good to be in his arms. She had then left him to sleep in the study and walked out to find Akka in the living room. Being awake all night, Manasi was yawning and Akka had insisted that she get some sleep.

Now, at almost noon, Manasi and Rakesh were having what can only be called an early lunch. Anu and Akka were fussing over Rakesh. It was only to be expected, he was their would be son-in-law. Moreover, he had come from far and Manasi was looking very happy to have him there.

“Please have some more,” Akka said.

Rakesh denied the additional serving a couple of times but finally caved in and ate some more. Manasi smiled at him and said, “Welcome to India!”

He laughed and said, “Don’t think you are going to escape! Wait till we go to Aurangabad!”

Manasi shook her head and got up saying, “We’ll see!”

They made their way to NDS around two thirty in the afternoon and it being Arun Kaka’s day off, Manasi was in the driver’s seat. She had chosen to take the Brio; easier to drive.

“The traffic in India just keeps getting worse,” Rakesh commented derisively after a few minutes.

Manasi quite agreed with him, but she still didn’t like his tone. “Hmmm.” She responded in a non committal tone. “But in last few days, I have also felt that the number of people following the traffic rules has increased.”

Rakesh looked skeptical but didn’t say anything. He looked out of the window for some time. Then he turned to smile fondly at Manasi when the FM radio played a song that both of them loved. Manasi smiled in response and hummed along.

Rakesh chuckled and said, “Make sure you don’t sing when my mother is

around, OK?”

Manasi knew she couldn't really sing, but she enjoyed listening to music and humming along. Rakesh had always told her how his mother sang well. She didn't know why it still bothered her when he said what he said. But she decided not to let it bother her and spoil their time together.

She decided to change the subject, “So I thought, we could leave by eight in the morning day after tomorrow. We can be in Aurangabad by lunchtime.”

“Let's start earlier. Say seven?” Rakesh said. “Oh and make sure to carry couple of good sarees.”

“Sarees?” Manasi draped a saree only occasionally. She liked sarees but draping one was not an easy task.

“Yes, we are having Satya Narayan pooja on Friday.”

“OK,” she capitulated. “So when are you taking me to see the Ajantha caves?”

“We can go on 25th or 27th.” After a pause he said, “On Sunday when you return, I'll be going to Amaravati for my cousin's wedding.”

They had reached NDS and Manasi said, “Here we are!” She felt a little awkward as they walked side by side into the NDS premises. But she also felt a sense of pride when she said, “Welcome to NDS!”

She took him on a tour of the facility and introduced to different people. She watched curiously when she introduced him to Vikram and later on when she introduced him to Jay. For a strange reason, when it seemed like both Vikram and Jay approved of Rakesh, she felt pleased.

Jay even took the two of them out for coffee.

“When I moved to Puget Sound, I had considered AccellaFab,” Rakesh said with a smile. “I also talked to one of the recruiters on phone. But then I decided to stay in the Web application space and didn't pursue that. You were looking for a very different kind of skill set.”

Jay smiled in acknowledgement of that, “Yes. AccellaFab needs rather different and somewhat difficult to find skills.” He then turned to look at Manasi and said, “Manasi here, has got a very good team in the technologies we need. They are doing an excellent job and my architect is very happy with Manasi for making a very big and positive change in the way that team works with us.”

Manasi had been working extremely hard for past six months and sometimes felt that Rakesh just didn't understand her challenge. She knew that Jay approved of their team, but she was thrilled that he made it a point to say that to Rakesh. Rakesh too seemed pleased to hear Jay praise NDS in general and Manasi specifically. There was definitely pride in the way he looked at her and smiled.

Two days later, Rakesh and Manasi left for Aurangabad early in the morning. Arun kaka drove the car as the two of them sat on the back seat. As soon as they got out of the city, Rakesh stretched out his arm and captured Manasi's hand in his. He caressed her hand softly and she found herself blushing and looking at Arun Kaka. Rakesh laughed softly and said, "We should have hired a taxi."

Manasi nodded and again glanced towards the rear view mirror. Rakesh lifted her hand, kissed it softly and said in a very soft tone, "We could have then stopped on the way, got ourselves a room at a hotel."

It had been a very long time since they had made love. Now Rakesh was here, but for last two days, being at her parents' house, they could not do anything more than kiss each other. That too only as a few stolen kisses. Things were not going to be any different at his place in Aurangabad.

Manasi turned to look at Arun Kaka when he said, "We can stop near Ahmednagar. You must be hungry."

Rakesh laughed at that but Manasi kept her expression blank with effort. "Yes, kaka. Let's do that." Then she found herself wondering if Arun Kaka had heard what Rakesh had said.

It was just after eleven when they drove into Rakesh's parents' driveway. Manasi had visited this place only once before and had been here only for couple of hours. It was a small house with a small garden around it. It seemed to have been painted since the last time she had seen it.

As they got out of the car, Sheetal, Rakesh's sister opened the front door and said, "Finally! I have been waiting since an hour!" Then she turned around and called her mother. As Rakesh took out his big suitcase from the boot, Sheetal said, "Ramaji will get the luggage. You come in!" Then she turned inside again and shouted, "Ramaji!"

Rakesh relinquished the luggage to Ramaji and climbed the steps with Manasi.

“Driver, you can park the car in the lane next to our house,” Sheetal said.

Rakesh’s mother, Sujata arrived carrying an Arati thali. She smiled at both Rakesh and Manasi. Then she asked Manasi to stand on the side as she put kumum on Rakesh’s forehead and did Aukshan for him.

They entered the house and Rakesh’s mother said, “Wash your hands and feet. Then we’ll have tea.”

“Can we also call Arun Kaka in for tea?” Manasi said. Then realising that neither Sheetal nor Sujata knew who she meant, she said, “Arun Kaka is our driver.”

When Manasi came back after washing up, Rakesh was already in the living room, seated on the sofa next to his mother. Manasi took the chair on his side. Sheetal came out carrying a tray. She put it down on the center table and said, “Manasi, why don’t you serve the tea here? I’ll call your driver.”

“I’ll call Arun Kaka,” Manasi said getting up. She went out and called Arun Kaka. Then he came in and said, “He’ll also need water.”

Sheetal gave her a strange look but then went into the kitchen and came out with a glass of water. Manasi went out to the veranda with both and found Arun Kaka there. He looked tired and she said, “Kaka, you can rest now. I’ll let you know when it is time for lunch.”

She came in and took the only cup left on the tray and sat down again in the same chair. She realised that Rakesh was telling his mother something about his job but she was looking strangely at Manasi instead. Not knowing how to interpret the look, Manasi smiled tentatively. Rakesh looked at Rakesh; he was smiling and still talking about his work.

After a while, Sujata got up and said, “Take out all the chocolates. After lunch, I’ll pack them.” Then she turned to Manasi and said, “Come into the kitchen Manasi. We can chat there.”

Manasi looked at Rakesh once and then followed his mother into the kitchen. “What time is lunch?” She asked.

“When Rakesh’s father comes home,” Sujata said.

“What time should I tell Arun kaka?”

“The driver?” Sujata asked. “You want the driver to eat here? Why don’t you give him some money and ask him to go and eat somewhere?”

Sujata went about the kitchen giving the preparations last touches then

said, “We only need to make rotis now. Do you want to make them?”

Make rotis? Manasi was aghast! “I can’t make rotis,” she said shaking her head.

“You can’t? What did you do when you lived in the US? Never made Indian food at home?”

“We get ready rotis,” Manasi said smiling.

“But you should learn these skills. You are going to be married now, you can’t keep buying rotis. You should make them at home,” Sujata said forcefully. “You have been living at your parents’ place for last six months. Didn’t your mother make you learn?”

Manasi felt like pointing out that she had been running a software company for last six months but kept quiet. She only shook her head and looked away. She watched Sujata make rotis till Rakesh came into the kitchen and said, “Here are all the chocolates.” Sujata turned to look and nodded. He put all the boxes and bags on the side board and said, “Should I call Nana?” He meant his father.

“He should be on his way.”

Rakesh asked, “I thought the class will be closed during the Christmas week.”

“This is a special batch. Started on Monday.”

“Tenth?” Manasi asked.

“No! It is too late for the 10th for a special batch. This is for the ninth and eleventh standards,” Sujata clarified.

Manasi was glad, when Rakesh said, “Manasi, let me show you Nana’s collection of old movies.”

She noticed Sujata give her a disapproving look. But she was feeling awkward standing in the kitchen, and Rakesh looked eager to show her the collection, so pretending that she didn’t understand the look, she said, “I hope that is OK Maa.”

Sujata didn’t voice her objection and Manasi followed Rakesh out of the kitchen.

For next three days, Manasi made an effort to enjoy her time with Rakesh and to not get upset about various expectations Sujata seemed to have from

her would be daughter-in-law. Manasi could not bring herself to see many of these expectations as valid or fair and Sujata made her disapproval obvious to Manasi. Sujata didn't say anything nasty or cutting. But she made sure Manasi realised her disapproval.

On late Wednesday afternoon, they were all seated in the Veranda and Nana was telling them all stories about strange students. After few of those, Sujata turned to Manasi and said, "I have an urge to have tea prepared by my daughter-in-law! Will you make some?"

Manasi smiled and got up. Sheetal accompanied her into the kitchen, showed her where everything was and went back. Manasi served the tea after about fifteen minutes and sat down with her own cup. She had taken just couple of sips when Sujata said, "Nice, but this is very weak."

"This is much stronger than how I like it," Manasi said smiling at Rakesh, who knew how she liked it. Rakesh smiled back at her. Both of them turned to look at Sujata when she said, "You will need to learn to make it the way we like it." It sounded like an order and Manasi felt annoyed.

"I like it," Nana said and then changed the topic.

Early on Thursday morning, Sujata suggested that Manasi prepare breakfast for all.

"I can make pohe," Manasi said.

"No, not pohe," Sheetal said. "Make something special!"

"Upama?" Manasi asked.

Sheetal shook her head. The only other thing Manasi could think of was eggs, but she knew that Dangeys didn't cook anything non vegetarian at home, including eggs.

"I have batter for dosa," Sujata said. "Make sambar and dosas."

"I can't make sambar. Or dosas," Manasi said.

"OK. Then I will have to do it," Sujata said with an audible sigh and got up to go into the kitchen. Manasi followed her and stood aside as Sujata went about making sambar and dosas, not saying a word to Manasi. After a while Manasi walked out feeling helpless and close to tears. She walked into Sheetal's room, which is where she was put up and sat on the bed telling herself not to cry.

Later on, on the dining table, Manasi wondered if the atmosphere was



going to be tense, but thankfully it was not.

They all went to Ajantha later that day. Rakesh had his SLR camera and Manasi took it from him to click a few pictures. Then she asked Sheetal to take a picture of Rakesh and herself against the caves and as Sheetal did that, Manasi noticed the disapproval on Sujata's face. She felt like screaming and asking Sujata, why she felt she had to disapprove every small thing! Did she not see that Rakesh was happy to have Manasi with him?

On Friday, Sujata looked at the Saree Manasi had taken along to drape and said, "Would you like to wear one of mine? Come let me show you." Rakesh looked pleased at his mother's generosity. When Manasi reluctantly followed Sujata to her wardrobe to look at her sarees, Sujata said so that only Manasi could hear, "In our family we tend to wear sarees that would look rich and classy." The tone made Manasi bristle. She finally draped her own saree explaining how her blouse would not match any of Sujata's sarees.

Manasi was to start back for Pune on Sunday afternoon. The Dangeys were to leave Aurangabad at the same time, to go to Amaravati, where Rakesh's cousin was getting married on Monday. But on Friday evening, after the pooja, Sujata suggested that they leave on Saturday evening instead of Sunday. "That way, we can be there when the boy's family comes in," she said. Rakesh argued against it, then he suggested that he stay back and go on Sunday. But Sujata didn't like that plan and insisted that they all go together. Manasi didn't take any part in the conversation but she was disappointed and felt very sad when Rakesh let Sujata convince him.

On Saturday morning, Rakesh announced that he and Manasi were going out for lunch by themselves. They went to a place a little out of the town and after ordering the food, Rakesh took Manasi's hands in his and said, "Please don't be upset. I agree that my mother should have at least let us know earlier that she wants to go a day earlier. But I am here for only a few days. I want to keep her in good mood."

What about me? Manasi thought, but she didn't say it. She didn't want to start comparing herself to his mother or have to compete with her for his attention! So making an effort not to sound upset, she said, "I wish we could spend more time together!"

"Me too!" Rakesh said and smiled. "I wish you could have come for the wedding. But since we are not married yet, you can't go along, you

understand right?”

Manasi didn't quite understand that either. If it had been her cousin's wedding, she would have insisted that Rakesh go with her.

“I would have taken you along for my cousin's wedding,” she said looking away.

Rakesh sighed and let go her hands. He sat up and fidgeted with his phone for a few moments. Then he said, “My aunt's family is too conservative. Believe me, they would not welcome you right now.”

When their food was served, they ate quietly for some time. It was Rakesh who broke the silence, “Please don't be mad, sweetie! We have the whole lifetime of togetherness ahead of us. We are going to live in the US, all this will not bother us then!”

Manasi smiled but it was more to make Rakesh feel better. Her visit, Sujata's attitude and Rakesh's capitulation continued to bother her.

“You look your best when you smile,” Rakesh said smiling a big smile. Manasi's smile broadened and he went ahead, “I'll try to come to Pune for couple more days before flying back.”

Arun Kaka was surprised that they were leaving a day earlier. But he also looked pleased. As the car left the Aunrangabad city limits he said, “These people are quite different from our people.”

“Hmmm,” Manasi didn't want to comment on it and get into a conversation about it, but she herself had not liked Arun kaka being referred to as ‘the driver’ all the time or him being asked to eat out side.

When Manasi reached home, Akka and Anu were seating at the dining table chatting comfortably. They both looked very happy and didn't seem to notice that Manasi was not her cheerful self.

“Hello Manu!” Akka said as Manasi bent down and hugged Akka.

“Do you want to have tea? Or are you ready for dinner?” Anu asked.

“Dinner,” Manasi said looking at the time. “I'll say hello to Daddy and then freshen up.”

“Daddy is already asleep,” Akka said. It was earlier than his usual bed time. Was he too tired? Not well? But Akka didn't look worried at all. So Manasi went to her room to freshen up.

When she sat down at the dining table ten minutes later, she could sense the happiness of the two women. She looked at her plate and noticed a bowl of kheer. “What’s special today?” She asked with a smile.

“Daddy was able to stand up today!” Anu could not contain her excitement.

“Oh!” Manasi felt elated to hear that. Her dejection from the trip vanished. “In his therapy session?”

Anu smiled and told her how Upendra had been saying no but the therapist pushed him and finally Upendra did stand up with support. “He was standing with support for almost half a minute!”

The three women talked happily about Upendra’s progress as they had their dinner. Akka served Manasi more kheer and Manasi didn’t object. It was only after the dinner table was cleared and the kitchen was clean that Anu said, “You should have gone with them for the wedding.”

“Rakesh said his aunt’s family is old fashioned. They wouldn’t have liked it.” Manasi smiled as she said this so that Anu would not realize how it had upset her. She didn’t want to tell Anu how she had felt judged by Sujata and found wanting. She didn’t want to tell Anu how she had felt let down by Rakesh’s capitulation to his mother’s wishes. Like Rakesh had said, all that would not matter when Manasi and Rakesh lived in the US. Yet, the fact that he would not do anything if it was against his mother’s wishes made her very uneasy.

Manasi didn’t sleep very well that night; kept tossing and turning. She was happy about her father’s progress and was excited at the new stirred hope that he would make a full recovery. But on the other hand, her Aurangabad trip had left a bad taste. It felt as if Rakesh’s mother didn’t approve anything about Manasi. She thought back to her earlier meetings with Sujata. She had met her twice before this visit. She had met her for the first time when Rakesh’s parents were visiting the US before Rakesh and Manasi got engaged. The four of them had gone on day trips around the Puget Sound and Rakesh’s parents had seemed to like Manasi a lot. They had gone over to Manasi’s place for lunch on one Sunday and praised the simple food she had made for them with the help of her roommate. After their US visit, Manasi had met them at the time of her engagement but that was hardly a meeting. Had Sujata’s attitude towards her changed? Or had she always had these expectations and Manasi had not had a chance to find that out earlier? Manasi kept thinking back to the time she had spent with them in the US and could

not remember any instances from that time that reflected the expectations expressed in this visit.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On Sunday, Manasi had her breakfast in her father's room. He was very cheerful thanks to the big step he had taken in his recovery. Manasi told him about her visit to Ajantha caves and he listened attentively. Manasi was glad to see Anu and Akka so cheerful. But she could not shake off her unease from her visit with the Dangeys even though she tried her best and she feared that her mother might notice her reticence. So around 11:30 she decided to go over to NDS. There were a lot of things to take care of and she could get started on those.

Jay looked up when he heard footsteps outside. He got up in surprise and opened the cabin door when he saw Manasi walking in.

She saw him and said, "Hi! What are you doing here on a Sunday?"

He smiled, "I moved into the rented bungalow yesterday. The place has no Network connectivity as of now. I need to take care of some communication that can't wait till tomorrow." Then as an after thought he said, "I assumed it is OK for me to come in even on a holiday. I hope it is."

"Of course!" Manasi replied.

Jay nodded, "What are you doing here?" Before she could reply, he went ahead and teased her, "The folks in Aurangabad made you run away?"

He was taken aback by her expressions and noticed her effort as she controlled her unguarded response before saying, "They had to go for a wedding to Amaravati and decided to leave a day earlier." She smiled and said, "I decided to come in and use the freed up time meaningfully."

Jay nodded and as she walked towards her office, he turned to walk back in the cabin, to the emails. After about an hour and half he walked over to her office to find her seated in front of her open laptop but looking outside the window. He waited for a while but she didn't turn around. Finally he knocked on the door and she turned around startled.

He opened the door and asked, "What were you planning to do about lunch?"

"Skip it!" she said and then laughed at his expression.

They went to the coffee shop nearby. It being the last week of the year, the air was pleasantly cool even in the afternoon. This part of the town housed a

lot of IT companies and many of their employees were off on their vacations as their customers enjoyed their holiday season. As Manasi and Jay walked the short distance to the coffee shop, Jay enjoyed the relaxed, laid back feel of the Sunday afternoon.

Jay was in India at this time of the year for the first time after going to the US fifteen years ago. When he had lived in Pune, he had stayed on Prabhat road in Joshi's outhouse. He had not gone anywhere much apart from his school and his classes. Once in a while, Joshi kaka would take him along and those were the only times Jay got to see something of the city. In those one off visits, he remembered going to see someone on Baner road. But that Baner road had been a quiet, narrow road, going to Baner village. So different from today's Baner road which was a four lane, busy road with big residential societies and commercial complexes on both sides. In last few days, Jay had gone around the city and it had changed so much that he was having trouble thinking about today's Pune as the same city as the one in his memory. Today, for the first time, he felt that the overall feel of the place was similar to what he had expected. But when he turned to look at Manasi with a smile to say as much, she seemed lost in thought.

"I am in India at this time of the year after a long time," Jay said when they sat down at a table in the coffee shop.

"Me too," Manasi replied. Then she smiled and went ahead, "I liked this time of the year in Puget Sound. The days are short; it is cold and rainy but there is a distinct feel of Christmas."

By the time they had finished with their coffee and sandwiches, they had talked about their favourite spots in Puget Sound area and their favorite activities there. Manasi told him about playing tennis, which he already knew. Jay told her about how he had learnt to ski and enjoyed it.

"Can we have another cup of coffee?" Manasi asked and Jay agreed willingly. Manasi insisted on paying and walked over to order for both of them.

Jay watched her as she talked to the cashier. Should he talk to her about NDS now? Steer the conversation to talk about her marriage and how he could take over? Or should he leave the business aside for the time being and enjoy this conversation with an old friend?

He needed to have her thinking about the takeover. The sooner he talked about it the better.

Manasi came back and sat down with a sigh and Jay raised his eyebrows in a question.

She shook her head and said, “Nothing really.” Then she looked at him and asked, “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead,” Jay said with a smile but his guards went up.

“Why aren’t you married?” Manasi asked bluntly.

“I haven’t found the right woman,” Jay gave his stock reply with a bland expression.

Manasi tilted her head and asked, “Never liked anyone to think about marrying her?”

Should he tell her that he had thought about marrying twice? That in both the cases the woman in question had rejected him? He looked at Manasi’s earnest expression and smiled, “Thought about it twice. But it didn’t work out.”

“Oh.” She seemed to hesitate a little before asking, “Did Mai like them?”

“The first one, Mai was not thrilled about, but was OK with. The second one, Mai didn’t really approve of because she was white. She spoke only English, which Mai couldn’t understand.”

“Was that the reason why things didn’t work out?”

“No,” Jay replied and looked at her curiously. All these questions about what had gone wrong about his relationships were probably because of some inner turmoil of hers.

He waited as their coffee was served and then reached out to place his hand over hers and asked quietly, “Manasi, what happened in Aurangabad?”

Manasi looked at him in surprise. Then she shook her head and pulled her hand away. Jay nodded and then said, “You don’t want to talk about it.”

Manasi shook her head and looked away. Jay picked up his cup and sipped the coffee continuing to look at her expressive face. When she was obviously upset about her fiancé or his family, he could not talk about NDS takeover. He wished she would talk to him. Was she so upset that she was thinking of breaking off her engagement? He didn’t like the thought of that. He wanted her to be looking forward to getting married to Rakesh. From the questions she had asked, the issue could be with Rakesh’s mother’s approval. But if Rakesh and Manasi were going to live in the US, that could only be a minor

irritant, not a major hurdle.

“Your coffee is getting cold,” he said and smiled at her when she turned around. She nodded and picked her cup up. He said, “If you need a sympathetic ear to talk to or a shoulder to cry on, you know where to find me.”

Manasi nodded, smiled and changing the subject asked, “So where is your rented bungalow?”

“In a lane off Prabhat road. Very close to Joshi Kaka’s place.” He chuckled softly at her expression, “Do you want to come over and see the place? And go and meet Joshi Kaka too?”

“I...”, She was getting ready to refuse. But then suddenly she seemed to change her mind and said, “Sure!” Then after a pause she said, “My mother told me that Joshi Ajji passed away and that Joshi Ajoba lives all alone.”

Jay nodded, “There is a young man who lives with Kaka to take care of him.”

After working for couple of hours, they got into the car Joshi Kaka had insisted Jay use, a Honda Amaze. Jay drove with ease and noticed Manasi watching him. “This is temporary. I am planning to buy a Tata car.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I need to drive a car manufactured here. Maybe Indigo.”

Manasi was quiet for a few moments and then asked, “What car do you drive in the US?”

Jay turned around and smiled. “Quite often my Lexus Sedan, it’s a Hybrid.”

“And if not that, then?”

Jay gave half a smile, “My other car is a BMW roadster.”

“Only those two cars? No Ferrari?” Manasi asked.

Jay laughed out at her cheekiness, “No Ferrari.” She didn’t seem to be awed by his wealth. He didn’t come across many people who were not.

After a few moments, Manasi asked, “What happened to the search for your brother?”

Jay sighed and said, “It has started. There are multiple people working on it, looking for information about him in villages around Hatmali. They are



trying to find out if anyone remembers anything from the time he went missing. We only have his photos from that time. Apart from those, we don't have anything to go by except for his name."

"Searching for someone who has gone missing so long ago must be really difficult."

"Yes. And moreover, he was a child of ten at that time so even the photos don't help much." Jay sighed once again. Manasi nodded in understanding and he went ahead, "My fear is that it is going to be wasted time and effort. That it is going to raise Mai's hopes and then I am going to have to tell her that it didn't work out."

"How long will you search?"

"The detectives I am working with have some ideas, so we'll explore those." He didn't know himself how long.

They reached his rented bungalow in a short time. Manasi got out of the car and opened the big gate on the left side of the house and Jay drove in to park the car next to the house. He climbed the three steps of the porch and unlocked the main door. Manasi walked in behind him and looked around.

Jay found himself watching Manasi's expressions. It didn't really matter what she thought of the place, but he wanted her to like the place. She took in the living room, the dining area, the guest room that opened up in the living room and then walked into the kitchen.

"Oh wow! What a lovely kitchen!" Manasi exclaimed and ran her hand over the long kitchen counter. "So big and airy!"

Jay smiled happily and said, "I think Mai will like it."

Then they walked to the other side of the dining area and Jay pointed to the two bedrooms on the two sides of the corridor, "Both these are mirror images. I am using this one right now," he said walking into one.

Manasi walked in behind him and looked around. Jay was pleased that the room looked neat and tidy; unlike how his bedroom normally was at home. He was glad Joshi Kaka had insisted that he hire a maid right away. "Through here is a veranda," he pointed to the door and then opened it.

"I thought Mai can use the other room. But I'll let her choose," He was saying too much; she would probably realize that he was nervous.

"You have got quite a lot of furniture," Manasi commented.

“Came with the house. But I need to get a TV before Mai comes over.”

“When is she coming over?”

“Next week. I also need to find a cook before that.”

Manasi walked out to the living room and Jay followed, “Do you want to have tea?” Looking at Manasi’s expression he smiled and said, “I can make good tea.”

Manasi shook her head, “Its not that. But if we are going to see Joshi Ajoba...”

Jay lifted his hand to look at the watch and swore under his breath.

“What happened?” Manasi asked looking at him with concern.

“I forgot my watch at the hotel when I checked out yesterday.” He should call them and check if it was ‘found’.

“Your Rolex?” Manasi asked looking aghast. Jay didn’t know why it pleased him that she had noticed he wore a Rolex.

They walked the short distance to Prabhat road and turned left to walk to the big building that stood in place of the old house. He noticed that Manasi was rather quiet and when he looked at her, he found Manasi looking at the bungalow next to the building, the bungalow where her grandparents had lived. She turned around and said, “It looks different from how I remember it. It was a single storied house then.”

They entered the building and ignoring the lift, Jay took the stairs. Manasi followed close behind as he climbed one flight of stairs. The door was opened by a young man who seemed to know Jay. He smiled and said, “Please come in Dada.” As they entered, he said, “Have a seat, I’ll tell Ajoba.”

Jay and Manasi took off their foot wear and sat on the sofa. “That is Umesh.”

Joshi Kaka came out from the bedroom, walking slowly with help of a walker. He smiled looking at Jay and then noticed Manasi. Jay read the question in his eyes and said, “Kaka, guess who this is!”

Joshi Kaka came closer and then sat in the chair kept at right angle to the sofa. He looked carefully at Manasi and said, “Anu’s elder daughter? Manu?”

Manasi smiled and said, “I am surprised you could recognize.”

“You look a lot like your mother,” Joshi Kaka said and then sighed. He

then asked about Manasi's grandparents. When Manasi told him about her father's stroke, he said, "Yes, I got to know. Must be quite difficult for Anu. How is she?"

Jay played an observer as Joshi Kaka chatted easily with Manasi. Umesh made tea for them all and served along with biscuits.

"This boy here has made me very proud!" Joshi Kaka said at one point. Jay wondered what Umesh had done that had made Kaka proud and then realised Kaka was not talking about Umesh! "When he first came to Pune, he was a timid, scared and depressed boy. Who would have predicted then, that twenty years later, he would have achieved such phenomenal success?!"

Jay felt uneasy with the praise, "I was lucky to have you to guide me. I might not even have stayed in the school otherwise."

Jay saw Manasi look at him and then turn to Joshi Kaka. She smiled and said, "I didn't recognise him at all. Deepu that I remembered from my childhood, and Jay that I met few days ago are so completely different!"

When they left Joshi Kaka's place half an hour later, Kaka had tears in his eyes. He got up with effort and said, "Manu, visit again. Tell Anu I was asking about her."

Jay drove quietly and Manasi mostly looked out of the window when they made their way back to NDS. Manasi had said she could take a rickshaw but Jay had insisted on driving her. They had stopped at a traffic signal when Manasi said, "Your hotel is on the way."

"Yes," Jay acknowledged.

"So why don't we stop at the hotel and ask about your watch?"

Jay had planned to stop on his way back. But looking at Manasi's eagerness to do that, he agreed and at the hotel, instead of going straight, he turned left.

Handing over the car for valet parking, Jay and Manasi walked in. Jay walked up to the reception and talked to the girl there. The girl said she will check and Jay turned around to watch Manasi. She was standing some distance away and talking on the phone. Her expression changed as her conversation progressed and Jay wondered if she was talking to Rakesh.

He turned around when the girl behind the counter said, "Sir?" The girl handed him an envelope and said, "Your watch sir. It was found by our room

service staff.”

That was strange. Shouldn't it have been found by house keeping? “Thank you,” he said.

“If you don't mind sir, the guy who found it, would like you to give him a call.”

Jay was surprised, but a hotel staff who returned such an expensive watch deserved acknowledgement and even a reward. “Sure, I would be happy to. Who do I call? Do you have the number?”

The girl handed him a small piece of paper and Jay looked at it. Then he smiled and said, “Prakash. OK.” This was the waiter who had helped him when he had cut his hand. Thanking the girl once again, he turned around. Manasi was still on the call so he walked across to the nearest cluster of sofas. He sat down and dialed the number from the paper. Call was picked up after three rings and when Jay mentioned that he was in the hotel lobby, Prakash told him that he would come out right away.

When Jay looked up, he saw that Manasi had finished her call and was looking around for him. She came over when he called out her name and asked, “What Happened? Did they find it?”

He told her briefly and then opened the envelope and took out his Rolex. “What happened?” He asked, not understanding the disapproval he saw in Manasi's eyes.

“I know you are very rich now, but still! I mean how can you be so careless about something so expensive?” She was scowling.

No one reprimanded him anymore, except for Mai on a few occasions. He liked that Manasi felt she could ask him that question disapprovingly. He smiled softly, slowly the smile turned into a big grin, “I am not careless. This has never happened before.” He then looked at how she was giving him a level look and said, “And I'll make sure this does not happen again.”

Manasi nodded and said, “Good.”

“Please don't tell Mai,” Jay said half seriously and grinned when Manasi laughed. He was thinking of how to broach the subject of what had bothered her on her trip to Aurangabad or about Rakesh when he saw Prakash, the guy from room service approaching.

Jay stood up with a smile and Prakash smiled a shy smile. “Sir, I didn't have your contact number, otherwise I would have called you.”

Prakash then proceeded to explain how he had seen the watch on a house keeping trolley and the guy in charge had said he didn't remember which room it was from. Prakash had then argued with him, picked up the watch and given it to the reception; he had remembered seeing it in Jay's room on the night when he had bandaged Jay's hand.

Jay thanked Prakash once again and said, "I am really grateful to you. Let me know if I can do anything for you!" He thought of offering Prakash some money, but didn't know how to.

Prakash said he didn't need anything, that he was glad that he could return Jay's watch. Jay really admired him for that and said, "Take down my number. Feel free to call me if you need or want to!"

On the drive over to NDS, Manasi asked more questions about his brother, Prakash and the search; Jay answered whatever he could. He himself didn't know answers to many questions.

That night, once again, he could not sleep. He kept thinking about Manasi. Why had she returned from Aurangabad a day earlier? Were things not well between Rakesh and her? She had said the reason was that the Dangeys were going for a wedding that Manasi was not invited to, but she had also looked quite unhappy. Then she had asked him if things had not worked out for him because Mai had disliked the two women he had thought about marrying. Was that because of Rakesh's mother?

He could understand it if Rakesh was insisting that Manasi return to the US so that they could get married. But what could Rakesh's mother dislike about Manasi? For that matter what could anyone dislike about her? She had been a perfect little girl at 8 and she was a perfect woman at 29!

Yes, he wanted her to want to get married and go to the US, so that she would be amiable for a NDS takeover. But if Manasi was not happy with Rakesh, if he was an asshole, Jay hoped Manasi would walk out on him! She should not have to take bullshit from anyone!

What if she broke off her engagement? What about NDS then? He sat up and switched on the lamp on the bedside table. He would worry about NDS later. If she was breaking off her engagement, he would try to help her through the painful phase of getting over Rakesh and the breakup.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Last few days of the year! Manasi could not believe that the year was already ending. The last Monday of the year did not have the feel of a busy work day. Not at all. More than half the people were on vacation. Even those who were in the office were in no mood to work and they didn't have pressing assignments to complete. Manasi spent time going over Mayank's projects with him and talking with Vikram about the finances.

Chandrika came in only in the afternoon and asked for Manasi's time right away. But Manasi wanted to talk to her anyway, so she agreed for a meeting. In the meeting Chandrika talked about wanting to work part time for two months as her son was in the tenth and she felt she needed to be home to ensure he was studying sincerely.

Manasi listened to her and then asked, "Why don't you come in, in the morning and work from home in the afternoon?"

"I had not considered that. I'll think about it," Chandrika said.

Manasi then talked about making Training a full fledged function. She described the vision about the function and how someone senior needed to shoulder the responsibility. While closing the meeting she said, "I would like you to draft the role of the function head."

One of the things suggested by Jay was put into action. She felt happy about it and she walked over to Jay's cabin to tell him the same but he was on the phone and looked engrossed; he didn't even look up. She then talked to Vikram about Niranjana. Vikram told her that Niranjana had talked to him and few others about how NDS had changed in last six months and that he sometimes wondered if this was a place he could continue to work at! Vikram also said that he didn't disagree with her but that they should discuss with Upendra before taking any decision about Niranjana.. Manasi came back to her office feeling annoyed. While Vikram had NDS's best interest at heart, he didn't want to take any important decisions. He wanted everything to be run by Upendra. Why had she not realised this so far? She had been focusing on projects so far and on improving the customer relationships in specific projects; she had not been taking any major decisions that would affect the complete organisation. Was it because her father had been too controlling that Vikram had gotten into the habit of running everything by him and not taking any major decisions?

Manasi did talk to her father; he was getting better by the day and so it went into a discussion. But he finally said he would leave the decision to Manasi. If she felt it was right to ask Niranjana to step down from his position or even leave; he would support that. In fact he even offered to talk to Niranjana in that case. Manasi felt quite overwhelmed when he said that. She was seated on a chair by his bed, so she got up to sit on his bed and gripped his left hand with both hers saying, "Thank you, Daddy!"

He smiled and then turned to Anu who was on the other side of the bed and said, "Our daughter has really grown up! She is running the company well and not hesitating to take tough decisions." Turning back to Manasi he said, "I am proud of you!"

By Wednesday Manasi and Vikram had worked on the job profiles for Chandrika and Niranjana's roles. They can now start recruiting for these positions.

Manasi wanted to run the two job profiles by Jay once but he had been in and out a lot and she had not got a chance to have a chat with him.

Everyone left work early on 31st Dec. Vikram had taken the day off and Jay had gone to Mumbai on Tuesday evening itself. Manasi got home at four and was pleasantly surprised to know that her mother had gone shopping with her cousin. For half an hour Manasi watched her father go through his physiotherapy. She had sat through his session only couple of times earlier. He was doing the exercises more sincerely now, maybe because he was clearly getting better.

She came out of her father's room in a cheerful mood and saw Akka at the dining table. "Let me make good coffee for you Akka," she volunteered.

Akka looked pleased and said, "It is good to have you home, Manu!"

When Manasi came out of the kitchen with two cups of coffee, Akka got up, wrapped a shawl around herself and said, "Let us sit in the veranda."

They were sitting in the veranda chatting for a while when Akka said, "Anu was saying you are going out with friends this evening."

"Hmmm. To PYC club. I thought it would be fun. The last time I went was with Mommy and Daddy before I went to the US. That was nine years ago!"

Dates used to go to PYC for the New Year's party with few of their friends. So when Himanshu, son of Upendra's close friend had asked Manasi

this time, she had willingly accepted.

“Are you going to drive?” Akka wanted to know.

“No. Himanshu is picking me up,” she clarified. She put her arm around Akka and rested her head on Akka’s shoulder. Akka smiled and patted her hand. Sitting quietly by Akka’s side and watching the shadows get longer as the evening sneaked in slowly, Manasi felt relaxed and content like she had not for a long time. Somehow, all the worries and tensions about NDS seemed to have melted away and Daddy was getting better day by day. Then thoughts about Rakesh and her recent visit to Aurangabad crept in and she sat up with a sigh!

“What happened, Manu?” Akka asked with concern.

Manasi smiled and shaking her head said, “Nothing. I was just wishing I could do this kind of thing everyday...”

Akka sighed in response and said, “God willing, your father will be back on his feet soon and will be able to take over from you.” Then Akka shook her head and said, “But then, you will get married to your Rakesh and go off to the US.”

Manasi got ready in contemplative mood. Akka was getting old and becoming frail. Manasi had a strong urge to take time off just to be with Akka. Chat with her like she used to, when she was in school. Have Akka tell her stories of Rama and Krishna, like she used to. Manasi wowed that she would make sure to spend proper time with Akka before going off to the US. She should check with Rachu when she can come down; it would be wonderful to have Rachu also here when Daddy was back on his feet; so that all five of them could be together for a while.

She knew the kind of crowd that would be attending; so she decided against a short dress and chose to wear her black dressy trousers and a silk top in maroon and black. The last time she had worn these trousers had been before she came to India and they had fit her perfectly. But she noticed that they were a little loose around the waist now; she shook her head. In the US, she used to exercise regularly; aerobics, kick boxing, yoga - she was doing a lot of things that were offered by Pro Sports club, where she had a membership. Still, she had to keep a watch on her weight; she had always



thought she had a tendency to put on weight. But in the last six months in India, she had not been exercising regularly at all; she had also not been watching what she ate. Yet, it looked like she had lost weight after all.

Himanshu drove up right on time at 8:30 p.m. and after a quick hello to her parents they were on their way. They chatted with easy familiarity; talking about their parents, who would be there at the party and earlier parties. The traffic surprised Manasi, she had not expected it to be this crowded. By the time they crossed the University, it was close to nine.

They were going to Prabhat road to pick up Himanshu's fiance and then to PYC. Manasi couldn't help wonder why Neha, his fiance could not just walk over to PYC, it was so close by. Of course, she didn't say anything. They reached Neha's place and had to wait a few minutes as she was not ready. Finally, it was quarter to ten when they drove from Neha's place to PYC. They passed through the lane with Jay's rented bungalow and Manasi looked at it curiously when she saw lights on. With Jay in Mumbai, why were the lights on? Then she thought she saw someone through the window; someone who seemed to be carrying something big in his arms.

By the time they reached PYC, Manasi was feeling restless. Was Jay being burgled? Should she call the police? She kept thinking about Jay's bungalow as the three of them entered the club and made their way to the party venue. She sat down at the table and looked around. She noticed that there were girls in short dresses; she could have worn her dress. She noticed a friend of her father and so she walked over and paid her regards. After that, instead of walking back to their table, she walked out to the lobby and decided to call Jay.

He finally picked up after many rings, "Hello," he sounded gruff.

"Jay, hi. This is Manasi," she said tentatively.

"Hi Manasi," He sounded much better now.

She went on hurriedly, "On my way to PYC, I passed your house and saw lights on. I know you are in Mumbai, and I was thinking if I should call the police. But then..."

He laughed a little and she got quiet. Then he said, "I am back in Pune and at home. Don't call the police on me."

“Oh!” She hadn’t expected him to be home on New year’s eve. Maybe he was going for a party. “Are you going for a party someplace?” She couldn’t help ask.

“No. I’ll be at home. Why?”

“It’s the new year’s eve! What are you going to do at home alone?” Manasi wondered now, if she should have asked him; maybe he didn’t know anyone to party with in Pune.

“I have been setting up the place, moving the furniture around and putting up curtains. I just had a shower. Now I am going to order some dinner,” he sounded matter of fact.

“Are you sure?” she asked and then after being reassured by him that he was fine, she ended the call.

But she could not leave it alone. She went around and talked to the management to see if they would take in one extra guest at the last minute. Upendra Date was an old member and the management obliged her by agreeing.

Happily she called Jay back. He picked up and said, “Hello Manasi.” This time he sounded better but she wondered if there was a slight annoyance at having been called once again.

“Hi Jay,” she said and then went ahead to explain how she had arranged so that he could join the party at PYC and ended with, “So, you can be here in fifteen minutes.”

He was quiet for a few moments and then said, “No, I am not going to go to the party at PYC.”

Manasi tried to convince him by telling him how it was a simple affair, how he could join her group and how the food was generally good. But he didn’t budge. He actually laughed when she talked about the food. Then he said, “Are you really keen on the party? Or can you step out?”

“What? Why?” She didn’t know what he was asking.

He chuckled and said, “I need to eat and I have been just told that they can’t take my order for food delivery. So if you are game, I would love to have company over dinner.”

“Oh!” Manasi exclaimed and without even consciously thinking about it found herself say, “Yes, sure.”

“Great! I’ll be outside PYC in fifteen minutes. See you,” Jay said and ended the call.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Manasi had been waiting for about five minutes when Jay drove over in his new, dark red Tata Indigo. She had been looking for the Honda Amaze that he had borrowed from Joshi Ajoba, so had not paid much attention to the bright new car, till it stopped almost next to her, and lowering the window, Jay called out to her.

She looked at him in surprise and then opened the car door saying, “Oh I didn’t know you had already bought the car!”

He smiled, “Just before going to Mumbai.” He put the car in gear and moved on as there were cars waiting behind him. He drove ahead on the crowded Bhandarkar road and asked her, “Where do you suggest we go for dinner?”

After some thought Manasi suggested a place off Karve road, since it was the closest place that she thought of and knew that it have good food. They reached there to find the place jam packed. They were not even taking orders for delivery anymore. After facing the same fate at couple of other, well known places, Jay said, “This is quite crazy!”

“Just like the US on the New Year’s eve,” Manasi said. “Don’t you think?”

Jay had never gone looking for a table for dinner in the US on new year’s eve, “Maybe,” he gave a non-committal reply.

Finally they got rolls packed from an outlet of Eatsome, a delivery only chain.

“Where to?” Jay asked Manasi once she placed the food and drinks’ bag carefully on the backseat.

“I can’t think of any place that will be quiet,” Manasi said dejectedly.

Jay felt guilty at having spoilt her evening. Should he ask her if she wanted to go back to the party? No, he didn’t want to do that. “I know a place that will be quiet. Are you OK to drive a little out of the city?”

When Manasi nodded, they set out. Manasi looked at the crowds on the streets for a few minutes and then turning to Jay, asked, “How would you be ushering in the new year, if you were in the US?”

Jay reflected on the last few years; the extravagant parties on the yachts and exotic islands; the gambling and pole dancers and once ending up drunk in bed with unknown women. He settled for, “Either attend or throw a party

with good food and fireworks.” That seemed to please Manasi and Jay congratulated himself.

Manasi thought about the things she had heard about his parties, “I saw some photos of your party on a yacht some years back.”

“Three years ago,” Jay said with a watchful expression. He tried to remember if something outrageous had got reported about that party. He felt relieved and encouraged looking at Manasi’s expression. He thought back to his first few years in the US and told her, “Earlier, I would go watch a movie or have a small gathering somewhere or stay at home, do nothing.” That too seemed to go well with Manasi and he congratulated himself once again. Then he asked, “What about you?”

“Movie or small party at a friend’s place,” Manasi said smiling. “Couple of times went for a party at a hotel in Seattle.”

Jay nodded and found himself telling her, “The first new year’s party as such I saw was at IIT. It was a very foreign concept to me.”

Manasi listened with a look of understanding and Jay found himself talk more about how he had struggled to adjust at the IIT. Then he felt he had revealed too much of himself so suddenly got quiet. Fortunately, before Manasi could ask him about that, he could say, “Just up this road and we have reached.”

Manasi looked around and noticed that it was not completely out of the city, but a road that looked deserted. She was surprised to come across such a place and asked, “How did you get to know about this place?”

Jay smiled at the incredulity in her tone and replied, “When I was looking around for a place to rent, the estate agent took me to many obscure places.”

The road climbed up some hundred meters and then turned left. After another fifty meters or so, the road just ended. There was a hillock ahead of that and a lot of wildly grown bushes. Jay parked the car on the side and they got out. Manasi was looking around and Jay wondered if she was going to be uncomfortable here. He rushed in to say, “We can sit there.”

They walked to the side of the road and sat on the half constructed parapet wall. They could see the city through the branches of the trees and shrubs that had grown wildly on the down slope of the hill beyond the wall. It was dark as the moon had not risen yet. They both turned on the torches in their mobile phones and unpacked the dinner. By the time they had laid out the

dinner in the middle, they had dropped a few paper napkins, juggled their packs of fruit drinks and once almost turned the box with their rolls upside down. Both of them were laughing when they started eating.

Jay looked at the chicken role in his hand after couple of bites and then looking at Manasi said, "This is quite good!"

Manasi was glad that he liked what she had picked out for him, "Isn't it? And not expensive at all!"

"Plus they were willing to serve us when no one else could care less!" Jay pointed out making Manasi giggle.

They ate at leisure, watching the lights of the city. The remote notes of the music playing at some party seemed quite enjoyable at this distance.

When Jay sighed, Manasi turned to look at him. Was he thinking of Mai? Or his brother? He must be worried about Mai's treatment for sure. "Did you go to Mumbai for Mai's treatment?" She found herself asking.

"No. To meet with the detective who is running a search for my brother."

"Oh!" Manasi exclaimed, Then because he didn't volunteer any more information, she asked, "Any luck?"

"There seems to be some progress, but we are again stuck." Jay said, looked far away, then at the roll in his hand and then took a bite.

After a few moments, Manasi asked, "Why are you stuck if there has been some progress?"

Jay took a sip of the fruit drink, looked at the pack in his hand and smiled at himself. Then he turned to look at Manasi and replied, "We found out that Prakash had stayed at a temple about 37 KM from Hatmali, our village. The current priest of the temple was a young guy of about 18 then. His father was the priest when Prakash just appeared there one day all those years ago. But then after a few days he left and never returned. We have asked a lot of questions to the priest and he has tried to remember and help us. But it was a long time ago. He thinks it is possible that Prakash left with a group of sadhus who had stayed in the temple for a few days."

Jay looked at the city once again and then back at Manasi, "No other information is available from that time. But the same priest also told us that some one had been looking for the old priest couple of years ago. That man had said that he had stayed at the temple for a short while many years ago." He sighed and shook his head, "We checked with a lot of temples around that

area, but no one else is able to give any more information. Checked at bus stands and railway stations too. But the problem there is that most people are only passing through these places. Things have changed a lot in the last twenty years and people have moved around a lot.”

“So what are you going to do now?” Manasi asked with concern. It seemed quite hopeless to her. But she didn’t want to voice her feeling. So when Jay didn’t say anything in response and just looked in the distance, to cheer him up, she said, “I am sure the detective will have more ideas about what can be done! Who knows, Prakash also will be making an effort to find you?”

Jay nodded and smiled. Then both of them got quiet. After eating in complete silence for quite a few minutes, Manasi smiled as she heard notes of a song she loved and Jay broke the silence asking, “What happened?”

“I love this song. It is my mother’s favourite! She used to sing this so well,” Manasi listened with her eyes closed for a few moments and then hummed along, “*Jeenewale soch le, yahi waqt hai karle poori arazoo...*”

Jay looked at her and smiled softly, enjoying her enjoyment. Then they found themselves talking about music they liked and Manasi was surprised that Jay didn’t know so many of the Hindi movie songs that she had assumed every Indian knew.

“Music was not part of my growing up,” Jay said turning to look at the bushes and rubbing his neck. “I became aware of the popularity of movies and the music at the IIT. I really started appreciating music after moving to the US.” He thought back to many evenings spent at Bindu’s place listening to music and hearing from her about different genres, some of the history of those, learning to pay attention to lyrics. It had been a long time ago. He missed those times when he used to be working hard, but still had time for himself; had time to try out different things; to chat late into the night. Life had changed so completely since he had started off on the AccellaFab journey.

Manasi looked at Jay and wondered why he had gone quiet. She picked up the music thread and said, “Did you join some music appreciation course or something?”

Jay came out of the past, turned to look at her and chuckled, “You can say that.” He looked at the city lights sprawled out at the distance and said, “Bindu, a friend of mine took me under her wing for grooming. I learnt about music from her, amongst other things.”

Manasi was suddenly very curious. Was this friend one of the two who he had thought about marrying, she wondered. The second one he had said was a white woman, so was Bindu the first one? But she couldn't ask him that.

"Was this when you were working at Microsoft?"

"Yes; soon after I joined Microsoft. Bindu was in the same development team and she realised how raw I was; how I struggled to fit in." He remembered that first long conversation he had had with Bindu on that long ago evening, in her office, about six months after he joined Microsoft. She had patiently kept asking him questions till he started talking about himself. "She taught me a lot of things. Took me on hikes, made me take dance lessons, made me realise the importance of reading. She is the one who got me into skiing."

Manasi realised that Jay felt grateful to this woman. She felt a curiosity about the unknown woman, someone who had supposedly helped the unformed and awkward Deepu turn into this confident, sophisticated man called Jay. Manasi got quiet and looked at the sky.

After a few moments, Jay stretched out his arm and pointed at the sky with his finger, "*Mruga*."

Manasi looked in the direction he was pointing at. With his finger, he drew the pattern of the constellation in the air, "Orion in English."

It took some time before she was able to see the complete constellation. Then still looking up in the sky she asked, "Did you study this too?"

Jay chuckled, "Not formally." He then pointed out a few more constellations to her before telling her, "My father taught Pakya and me about these constellations. In summers, even the nights were really hot in Hatmali. On nights when it was so hot, and we felt as if we just could not breathe inside our house, we would go lie down in our court yard, and then look at the cloudless sky. My father would then ask us to identify the planets and stars and constellations."

She smiled and said, "It must have been wonderful to lie under an open sky and look at the stars."

He chuckled and shook his head, "It was. But sometimes, it was so bloody hot and sultry, that it didn't seem wonderful at all. Of course, one of the reasons my father used to do that was to take our mind off the discomfort we were feeling, but then he also used it as an opportunity to teach us. He was a



real teacher at heart. Always looking for opportunities to teach something to someone!”

There was love and reverence in his voice when he reminisced about his father. Manasi was hearing him talk about his father like this for the first time. Deepu had talked about how he had wanted to be a teacher like his father twenty years ago but Jay had never talked to her about his father. Or his brother. Except that he had one and that he was here to run a search for him. She looked at him and sombrely said, “You must have felt terrible when you came to Pune. I didn’t know all this then, but I remember thinking that you looked sad most of the times. Mai too.”

Jay didn’t say anything to that; he just looked away. After a few moments Manasi went ahead to say, “You must have missed him a lot!”

“Yes, I did,” Jay was quick to accept, “I also used to wish I had returned earlier that day or not gone for my exam so that I would have been at home when Mai was looking for someone to go call my father.”

Manasi could understand his pain, his sorrow. Surely, it must have been too much to handle for a fifteen year old! Even being displaced from his place to a city like Pune, and in a troubled frame of mind must have been really difficult.

“How did you decide to come to Pune? Did you know Joshi Ajoba?”

“Mai’s sister had lived in Pune for some time. Her husband was working for the state transport and living in Pune. She worked for Joshi Kaku when she was in Pune. When everyone suggested going to a different place so that I could complete my tenth, she suggested Pune. She asked us to go and meet Joshis.” After a pause, he turned to look at her before continuing, “Joshis were wonderful to us. Joshi kaka got me admission in the school and helped me with the studies. He asked me to work in the garden but never burdened me with too much of it. He kept me occupied and that was good. Joshi kaku was always unwell but she was very nice to Mai. Two of them had become good friends in the eight years that Mai lived in Pune at Joshis place.”

Manasi could see how grateful he felt. After all, he had got the much needed support from Joshis in his most difficult time. But to have overcome the tragedy and to move ahead to achieve the kind of success he had was truly amazing. She felt proud of him. Proud of the unlikely, scrawny friend from her childhood; proud of the successful, powerful IT magnate by her side! Though she still struggled sometimes to believe that Deepu she knew

then is Jay she was getting to know now, tonight, it was becoming quite apparent, that inside the magnate's heart, there still lived the scared, sad fifteen year old in a corner.

The weather was getting chillier now; she wished she had a jacket or a shawl. She shivered a little and when Jay looked at her, because she didn't want him to notice her discomfort, hurried to ask, "Have you gone back to Hatmali after you left the place after your father died?"

Jay shook his head, "No, I haven't. Mai keeps telling me I should." He looked up at the dark sky again and after a long, quiet moment he sighed and changed the topic, "It is wonderful to see a sky like this. It is almost impossible to see the stars in any city these days."

"The first time I saw a star studded sky was when I had gone camping," Manasi told him. "I was in eleventh and the plan was made at the last minute. My father was out of station." She remembered how her mother had been a little hesitant to let her go but had relented when Manasi kept pestering her, telling her how much she wanted to go and how all her friends were going. Her friends were always asking her to join for camping and trekking. But her father had told her that she could only go for day trips. That she was not allowed to go for overnight treks or for camping. So this time, when her mother allowed her to go, she was very excited. It was a group of twelve people, five girls and seven boys. They had gone to a fort near Pune and stayed overnight in tents. Manasi had enjoyed the experience thoroughly and had looked forward to more such outings. She had got back home two hours later than when she had said she would and her father had been extremely angry; with her and more with her mother, for allowing her to go. "Daddy was very angry with me when I returned."

"Why?" Jay asked when she didn't elaborate.

And sitting there under the starlit sky, on the most unusual New Year's eve of her life, Manasi found herself telling him about how her father wanted his wife as well as his daughters to be absolutely conventional and how he hadn't allowed her mother to continue to sing or let Manasi learn classical dance; about how he would get angry with her mother all the time. "I never went camping again, till I went to the US!" She told him.

It felt like a night meant for sharing confidences. Jay seemed interested in what she was saying, curious to know more and that was encouragement

enough for her to talk about things she had not shared with anyone; not even Rakesh, “I became an engineer hoping to work with daddy, but by the time I was in the third year, I realised that though he might let me join NDS, I would have a real tough time there. He would find faults in everything I did, just the way he did at home. I didn’t want any special treatment at NDS, but I got scared that he would make it really difficult for me; he might scold me, yell at me in front of other people. That I won’t be able to work with him.

“I used to be always scared of what he will say or do. I saw how he treated my mother and I couldn’t tolerate that. I think I hated him for a while! That is why I decided to do masters in the US, and worked really hard to get a scholarship.”

The girl who had run away to the US to stay away from NDS, had become a smart, capable woman and returned to take reins of the same company as the CEO, Jay thought with admiration. Everyone, including her father had to accept that she was the best thing to have happened to NDS. Jay looked at her now and thought about the sweet eight year old girl who had unknowingly helped him cope. She had been a bright child, full of dreams. Sad that her father had driven her away, she could have been a big support to him at NDS from the time she would have started working. But he was glad she had gone away to the US and enjoyed the freedom there.

Though she was back to take care of NDS right now, her fiance was waiting impatiently for her to marry him and return to the US. He was glad about that too, Jay told himself. He admired her for who she was and he enjoyed her company but he needed her to get married and go to the US.

In the next few days, he would talk to her about her plans and explain how it would be advantageous to all concerned to hand over NDS to the right party. He was confident that he could make her see bringing NDS under AccellaFab would be the right thing to do. That would make it easy for her to go ahead with her wedding and fly off to the US.

But he was not going to mention any of that right now nor bring up her fiance. This night felt like a time out of time that the two of them would spend sharing things with each other about themselves; their secrets and confidences; things that neither of them had talked about with anyone else. He had never told anyone about his father and he was sure that Manasi had not talked about her father with anyone either.

“Scholarship at UCLA!” He exclaimed and felt glad when she seemed

pleased with his reaction.

Manasi found herself talk about her father's annoyance at her and his anger with her mother because she couldn't stop Manasi either. She told him how she almost changed her mind because she felt guilty about going away while her mother continued to face her father's ire. "But then it was Mamma who understood how I felt and would not let me change my plans." Manasi smiled a little.

"Mai didn't want me to go to the US. She knew nothing about Microsoft and she couldn't get over the fact that I will be so far away from her. But Joshi kaka talked to her and told her that it was a good opportunity for me and that it would change my life. Which it did." It had been a golden opportunity and Jay had used it really well, Manasi reflected. "Mai stayed with Joshis for another year and then went to My mama's village. For a long time, she refused to come over to the US, and then when she did visit, she kept telling me she didn't like it there."

Manasi looked at him and wondered if he ever wished he had chosen not to go to the US. But she didn't say that. She told him about her parents visit to the US and about her mother going the second time by herself, "I think it was a good break for her from Daddy."

Then they got quiet and looked at the city lights again.

Manasi heard another song from the distance and started humming a little.

She turned to look at Jay and found him looking intently at her. When she went to say something, he put a finger on his lips and asked her to stay quiet. Then he moved in very slowly. Was he going to kiss her? She could not make up her mind about how to react. But before she could decide, he darted his arm and grabbed something from the branch of the small tree behind her. She didn't understand what was going on but as she turned to look, she saw Jay draw back with a snake held in his hand. It was a good eight feet long reptile, and Jay was holding its head easily in his hand. Manasi just stared at it, she couldn't say a word. It had been just behind her. She was moving about, humming a song. Would it have bitten her?

Jay got up and walked some distance from the parapet wall. When he released the reptile on the ground carefully it rustled away in a hurry. Jay walked back and took in Manasi's stunned look. As he sat down, he said, "Manu, it is OK. It was only a common rat snake or '*Dhaman*' in Marathi. It is non-venomous."

Manasi's brain was not yet functioning, she was still in the throes of fear. Jay held both her hands in his and then noticing that they were extremely cold started massaging them. After a few moments, Manasi turned around to look at the bushes and small trees behind her. When she turned back, she noticed that her hands were held in Jay's and he was looking at her curiously. She pulled her hands out of his saying, "I am OK." Then she got up in a hurry. She couldn't continue to sit there. She slowly became aware of many things and had a lot of questions. "How did you just catch it like that?" She asked. Then before he could answer, she asked another question, "How did you know what snake it was and whether it was poisonous or not?"

Jay looked at her standing there uneasily and captured one of her hands again as he said, "In our village there were a lot of snakes and I learnt to catch them when I was a small boy. I worked in the garden remember? I have seen a lot of rat snakes." He didn't tell her that when he had noticed the snake just behind her, he had not realised it was a rat snake. Or that he had not had an occasion to catch a snake in many years. That he had not been sure he could catch it quickly and correctly. But it was so close to her that he really didn't have any other option.

He noticed that Manasi had calmed down considerably but guessed that she probably would not be comfortable here now. So he asked her, "Do you want go and check if we can get coffee some where?"

Manasi nodded her agreement and started to clean up. She remembered that he had called her Manu. The name everyone called her by when he had saved her from getting kidnapped all those years ago. And tonight he had saved her from the snake. Even if he had gone out of his way to make her feel that it was no big deal, she was realising that he might not have known that it was a rat snake when he had reached out to catch it.

Cleaning done, Jay looked at her and smiled. She smiled back and said, "Thank you, Deepu."

He was clearly taken aback. Mai called him Deepu and that was OK. But he didn't want Manasi to call him Deepu any more. This was not the time to tell her that, though. So he just nodded and walked towards the car. Just as they reached the car, there was a big noise and suddenly a lot of crackers started bursting.

"I am glad to be away from all that noise!" Manasi said with feeling and Jay chuckled.

He held his right hand in front of her and when she put hers in his, said, “Happy New Year, Manasi.”

Manasi noticed he had gone back to using her full name. She shook his hand and said, “Thank you. And a very happy new year to you, Jay!” She wondered if he would be OK if she gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then, not letting herself think more about it, Manasi quickly reached up and gave a quick peck on his left cheek.

For the second time in less than two minutes, Jay was taken aback; actually more than that. This time he was shocked. He was tempted to touch his cheek and stopped himself with effort. What was that? Why did she do that?

In the society he moved in these days, peck on the cheek was really nothing. He had kissed many women and was kissed by innumerable women, similarly. But this was Manasi. This was different. Oh so different! It pleased him of course! He found himself smiling without even knowing it. He had a strong urge to pull her closer and kiss her properly. He stopped himself with an effort. He reminded himself that she was engaged to be married. Moreover, he wanted her to want to get married soon so that she would be favourable for NDS acquisition.

That thought worked like a charm. He asked her, “Don’t you want to call Rakesh and wish him?”

“Oh yes!” Manasi said with a lot more zest than she felt at the prospect, to cover up her uneasiness. She was feeling guilty because she had forgotten all about Rakesh. She should have thought about calling him. Instead Jay had to remind her!

She opened the rear door of the car, pulled out her small clutch and took out the cell phone. She dialled Rakesh’s number and waited. Then looked at the screen in surprise because she had no network connectivity. “There is no range here!” she said almost accusingly.

Jay pulled out his phone and checked to get the same results. No connectivity. He opened the passenger door for her and said, “Let’s go closer to the city and you can call from there.”

Manasi got into the car without another word and wondered why she was feeling so upset suddenly.

Jay drove down the hill and towards the city. They passed a lot of noisy groups and people on motorcycles driving really fast, at the same time

honking and yelling. All this was unexpected for Jay. He had not spent a new year's eve in India since he joined Microsoft. He was wondering if this was the usual thing or people were exceptionally unruly tonight. He was about to ask Manasi when she picked up her phone for the third time and said, "Oh finally!" Then she dialled a number and put the phone to her ear.

After the phone had rung for the whole minute, she said, "He must have tried and found my phone not reachable!" She forced herself to calm down. Why was she angry with Jay? He didn't know the phone would not have range. It was not his fault that Rakesh was not picking up the phone now. She looked at Jay and asked, "Don't you want to call someone?"

"No. No one."

Manasi felt sad about the way he said it. To cheer him up she asked, "You wanted to have coffee right?"

Jay noticed her change of mood and said, "Only if you are in the mood for a cup."

She nodded and then said, "Let me call Himanshu once." She dialled Himanshu's number and when he didn't pick up either, she messaged him to call her, when he got a chance. "There would be a lot of music and dancing going on at the party. He won't have been able to hear the phone." She explained. Then she realised that the same might be true about Rakesh too. She had not considered the possibility since Rakesh had told her that he won't be doing anything much. That he would be home with his parents and sister.

They did find a coffee shop and as they were sitting down with their cups of coffee, Manasi's phone rang. It was Himanshu. She had left the party and then messaged him that she was going out with a friend for some time. He wanted to know if she was going back to the party or not. She made an effort to sound as if nothing was unusual and said, "I'll be back at the party in a short while. You'll be around for a while right?"

She sipped her coffee and stole a look at Jay. He looked completely at ease. She was the one feeling awkward all of a sudden! "I need to get back to the party." She told him.

He only nodded and sipped his coffee wondering why Manasi was suddenly upset. Was it because Rakesh didn't pick up the phone or was it because she had not thought about calling him till Jay had reminded her?

They left the coffee shop and made their way back towards the PYC club. Manasi felt reluctant to go back to the party. She would have to answer Himanshu's questions. In retrospect, she felt she should not have left the party and gone out with Jay. She didn't even want to tell Himanshu that she had gone out with Jay. She definitely didn't want to tell her mother and grandmother; or Rakesh.

What had come over her? Why did she agree to go with him?

But what was wrong in going out with him? He was a friend, who had been alone, looking for some company. Why was she feeling guilty about it now?

Jay pulled up near PYC and turned to look at Manasi. She looked unsure and reached to open the door. He put a hand on her arm to stop her from getting out in a hurry and said, "Thank you for agreeing to join me for dinner. I really enjoyed this unusual evening. Once again, wish you a great year ahead. And if I spoilt your evening, I am sorry."

Manasi felt guilty in a different way now. She didn't want him to feel he had spoilt her evening. "No. No, you didn't. I liked watching the sky and the city lights from far. I really enjoyed the dinner and our conversation. Wish you a happy new year. And a big thank you for saving me from the snake!"

Jay smiled and nodded. When she got out, he drove off almost in a hurry.

Manasi was glad that Himanshu and his fiancée were wrapped up in themselves and didn't question her about her absence from the party for such a long time. Next morning, Anupama woke her up around 8:30 to ask her if she was planning to go to work or take the day off. Manasi got up and got ready in a hurry. Thanks to the rush, she didn't need to talk about the previous night and she was glad she didn't have to decide whether to mention going out with Jay. But it kept bothering her. She couldn't shake off the feeling that Jay had saved her from getting a snake bite. The annoyance at having forgotten about Rakesh and then not being able to talk to him also persisted. Rakesh must have seen her missed call by now, but he had not called her either. That thought only added to her annoyance overall.

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

Manasi got to NDS by ten knowing well that hardly anyone would be there. But Mayank had said he would be in and she needed to talk to him



about couple of Indian projects. She had just started the coffee machine when there was a knock on her door. Turning around, she saw Jay standing outside with a cup in his hand and a big smile on his face. He entered and said, “I have been waiting for an hour for the coffee!”

Manasi smiled at the tone and asked, “Why didn’t you make it?”

“Sheer laziness,” Jay said making Manasi laugh.

She had been worried about the awkwardness between them. She had decided that her impromptu kiss on Jay’s cheek had been a mistake. Laughing with him at a silly remark, it felt good to go back to the easy, friendly space.

She filled up Jay’s cup but he didn’t get up to go as she had expected him to. After some casual remarks about the weather and the relaxed atmosphere in the office he said, “I want to start a two people team for AccellaFab. One senior person focusing on the requirements and design. A good programmer to work with this person.”

“Right away?” Manasi felt excited at the prospect of starting work on a new product and NDS being involved right from the ideation.

“As soon as possible,” Jay said and then sipped his coffee.

“I am meeting Mayank today. I’ll ask him to set this up. The contract can be with the same terms as the ZipMake project?” ZipMake was their best customer as far as the rates and terms were concerned.

Jay didn’t say anything right away. Why won’t he agree, Manasi wondered. “Let me look at the contract.” Jay said. “We might need to think of a different model.”

Different model? What did he mean? But Manasi didn’t ask him. She didn’t want to seem as ignorant as she knew she was.

“OK. I’ll ask Mayank to identify the people.”

In the afternoon, Chandrika came in and asked for Manasi’s time right away. Manasi went into the meeting hoping that Chandrika didn’t have too much to complain about and that she was not going to be too argumentative. So she was pleasantly surprised when Chandrika presented what she had detailed out as the role for the head of Learning and Development function. She had defined a charter for the function and specific responsibilities for the function head. She had also defined goals for the first year.

“Once you go through this, we can discuss. Have a meeting involving others,” Chandrika said.

Manasi could see the confidence and realised that this is what her father must have seen; a capable, confident woman. Manasi smiled and said, “Yes. I’ll go through this in a day or two and let us finalise before presenting this to others. By the way, we’ll need a senior, mature person to head this function.”

As Manasi went to open the door, Chandrika said, “I would have loved to handle this function if I weren’t already taking care of Talent Management.”

Manasi was really pleased to hear that. However, she didn’t want to commit till she had gone through the complete plan. So she said, “Let us think about the function head when we meet again.”

Manasi managed to get away early and reached home just as Akka was making coffee. She sat with Akka on the front porch, sipping coffee. In her father’s room the physiotherapy session was going on. She had kept waiting for Rakesh’s call but so far he had not called. Should she call him? But she was the one who had called last night hadn’t she? Why didn’t he call back seeing her missed call? She was looking at the Neem tree lost in her thoughts when Akka touched her arm and said, “Manu”.

Manasi tuned to Akka with a smile and said, “Umm?”

“You looked lost,” Akka said. Then she looked at Manasi curiously and asked, “How was your party last night?”

Should she tell Akka that she didn’t spend much time at the party? Should she tell her that she had almost got bitten by a snake? “The usual,” she said. “You know. Good food, lot of drinking, then dancing.” It sounded so boring, Manasi thought. She had been quite eager to go for the party, though she knew this is what the party would be. Why did that seem so boring now?

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Akka asked.

Manasi had enjoyed herself a lot. It had been a wonderful evening. Almost till the end. “Yes,” she said softly. But it also made her feel strangely guilty.

“That’s good. That is what matters, Manu. So what if it was the usual?” Akka patted her on the back and for some unfathomable reason, Manasi felt close to tears.

They sat quietly for some time and then Akka said, “Its getting cold. Let us go in.”

They entered through the main door to find the physiotherapist walking out of Upendra Date's room with a satisfied look. He refused Akka's offer of coffee and left. Manasi and Akka both went into Upendra's room to find Upendra watching the news, seated upright on the bed with his feet on the ground. Anupama was standing next to him, watching him closely. He turned to look at his mother and daughter entering the room and said, "Can one of you tell Anu that I am not going to fall?"

He was in a very good mood and happy to chat with the three of them. But he got tired after a while and wanted to lie down.

The three women came out of his room and Anupama said, "Oh, Manu! Rakesh had called last night! He said he could not reach you on your phone! Around ten, I think." "Oh!" Manasi said stopping mid-step.

"Did you two talk today?" Manasi shook her head, "I thought you would want to wish each other a happy new year!" Anupama said with a smile.

"Yes. Let me call him," Manasi said and went to her room.

She called Rakesh and wondered why she was feeling this uneasy about talking to him.

"Hi Manasi," he sounded almost bored.

"Hi!" Manasi tried to infuse enthusiasm in the conversation. "Happy new year!"

"Happy new year to you too!" Rakesh seemed to be smiling at her tone. "I tried calling you but your phone was not reachable." Thankfully he went ahead, "I saw your missed call but by that time it was half an hour later. I guessed that you must be lost in the party with loud music and dancing. So didn't call back."

"I wish you had," She said but then decided to keep that aside. "So you want to come to Pune for couple of days?" That will give them a little more time with each other.

Rakesh sighed. "I don't think I can get away right now. Some relatives are coming over. They are coming specifically so that they can see me."

He seemed all wrapped up in his relatives, didn't have any time for her. "I would have loved to come over again, but I really need to start focusing on our Indian customers." She clarified before he could bring up the topic.

"You also have that big shot AccellaFab guy working from NDS. It would not be a good idea to let him have a free hand there, you know!"

Rakesh didn't see any reason to trust Jay. But then he had not seen how much Jay was helping her; he was her sounding board; he was giving her ideas on how to bring in the change NDS needed. Plus he was giving them an opportunity to work on AccellaFab's new product line.

"You just be careful about him!" Rakesh said when Manasi just kept quiet.

"Don't worry, Rakesh!" Manasi didn't know how to get Rakesh to see that Jay was not the bad guy he was said to be. "You are flying on 10th right?"

"Yeah!" Rakesh said and then before she could say anything rushed ahead, "Can you come to Mumbai on 8th? We can spend couple of days in Mumbai.

"Yes. Let us do that," Manasi said without hesitation even though she knew that he would want to talk about setting a date for their wedding.

On Saturday, Manasi did a quick call with Abhijit kaka. She realised that since Jay had started advising her, she didn't feel the urge to talk to Abhijit kaka for guidance anymore. She also spent a lot of time with her father. She updated him on various fronts regarding NDS. She told him about Chandrika drafting the new role and how Vikram and she were thinking of asking Chandrika to take on the new role.

Her father listened quietly and then surprised Manasi by saying, "That role might be better suited for her."

Manasi wanted to ask him why he had put her in the role of a HR head, but she decided this was not the time. Then she mentioned that Jay was still in Pune and would be for a while and that after a lot of thought they had agreed to let him continue to work from NDS premises till he wanted. She was surprised once again, when that didn't seem to upset Upendra. He just nodded as if it was not a big deal. Then he asked, "What about Niranjana?"

"We have defined the requirements of his role. Vikram and I. And I took some help from Jay on that," Manasi decided it was best to mention that.

"Can we find another role for him at NDS?"

It was obvious that while Upendra saw sense in letting Manasi decide what was best for the company and he would stand by her decisions, possibility of asking Niranjana to go saddened him. Manasi put her hand on his and said, "Daddy, he is a very senior person. We don't have another senior role that he could play."

Upendra sighed and said, "I think in that case, it would be best for me to

talk to him. I'll talk to him on phone first and ask him to come over. But give me some time."

After that they discussed some operational issues and Manasi asked, "Daddy, now that you are feeling so much better, do you want me to start involving you in discussions and decision making?"

Upendra smiled and shook his head. "You are doing really well, Manu. You understand this much better than me. Talk to me about things if you need my opinion or suggestions, but don't involve me officially in the discussions. I think you have made better decisions in the past six months than I have in that many years!"

What was he saying? That he didn't want to be involved in NDS? Not till he was completely back on his feet or not at all? He closed his eyes and lay quietly for some time. Manasi wondered if this was tiring him out more than usual. But when she went to get up, he opened his eyes and held her hand, urging her to stay put.

"I know, you and Rakesh have put your plans on hold. And while I am glad that you stepped in to take care of NDS, I don't want it to be a hurdle in your way. So if you two want to set a date for your wedding sometime after April, I think we can figure things out by then."

Would he be completely OK by then? Ready to take on the responsibility of running the company? Manasi smiled and said, "We can wait few more months, if needed."

"Is Rakesh coming back to Pune before flying off to the US?"

"No. He has got relatives coming over," She told him. It didn't bother her now, like it had when she had talked to him the previous night. "But I am going to Mumbai a day before his flight. So that we'll get to spend at least some time together."

Upendra's immediate question was, "Where are you going to stay?"

Manasi felt like laughing. She felt like telling him that they were booking a hotel room for themselves, just to see his reaction. Then she took pity on him and said, "I'll stay at Anju tai's place. Rakesh will stay at his cousin's place, not far from Anju tai's place."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

On Friday, Manasi got onto Deccan Queen to go to Mumbai. She was looking forward to the Pune-Mumbai train journey. This is how they would travel to Mumbai in her childhood and Deccan Queen had a special place in her heart. She ordered breakfast and then looked outside the window lost in her thoughts.

Upendra had said that Rakesh and she could set the date for their wedding sometime after April. But would he be in a position to take over both the factory as well as NDS? What if it became too much for him? She then found herself thinking about some folks from NDS; people she had worked closely with on some of the challenging projects; people who looked to her for guidance. Will Daddy be able to provide the kind of support and guidance that they had come to expect from her? What about the new AccellaFab project? Will Daddy be able to work with Jay?

For a long time she had kept focusing on the immediate needs at NDS, always knowing that when the time was right, she was going to go back to the US. She had not thought about what the place had come to mean to her or how she would feel going away from it. But now, going to the US didn't seem so appealing. With the thought that she would return to the US, she had never asked Rakesh if he would be willing to relocate to India instead. Maybe she should talk to him about that. He could be a big help to her at NDS. If he didn't want to work at NDS, he could look for a job in one of the bigger software companies in Pune. Surely, he would be able to find a good job in Pune.

She got off at Dadar and called Rakesh. He said that he had gone shopping but will meet her for lunch at Orchid hotel near the airport. Manasi was surprised to hear that he was not staying with his cousin as they had talked. That he had booked himself in the hotel near the airport. Did he want her to stay with him at the hotel? They had stayed with each other quite often in the US but today they had made plans to stay with their cousins respectively. If she stayed with him now, it would seem like the plan to stay with her cousin was just a ruse; that didn't seem right to her. She decided to drop off her bag at her cousin's place before making her way to the hotel.

At the hotel she had been in the lobby for about ten minutes when Rakesh came in.

“Hi!”, He said enthusiastically. “Are you hungry? Or should we check in first?” He seemed to be assuming that she would stay with him. Should she give in?

“Let us eat first,” she said with a smile. That should give her time to think about staying with him.

So Rakesh kept all his shopping bags at the concierge, where his luggage too was parked and they made their way to Boulevard, the coffee shop.

They sat at a table for two and Manasi looked around.

After they had taken time to look at the menu and place their order, Rakesh sighed and said, “I am going to miss good home cooked food.”

Manasi smiled, “Yes. For the first few days after going back from India, that is what one misses the most!”

Rakesh reached out and captured her left hand, “When are you planning to come back to the US? I have really missed you all these months. And this India trip, I had hoped to be able to spend time with you, but just couldn’t.”

Manasi got a little uncomfortable, “I would love to be able to tell you when. Daddy is getting better and he thinks we can set a date sometime after April, but I am not so sure about that.”

“April,” Rakesh said approvingly. “That gives us three months to plan and get ready.”

“No. I mean, I am not sure about April,” Manasi said.

“Come on darling! It’s another three months. I am sure your father will be well by then. And aren’t you eager to get out of the situation and get our life on track?”

Life back on track?

“Rakesh,” She said tentatively, “You know, in the last seven months, I thought so many times that it would be so nice to have you here with me, helping me at NDS.” She looked at his scowl, “Or not help at NDS, but just be here. You know. Maybe take up a job here?”

Rakesh smiled, “You missed me too then eh?”

She smiled a non committal smile, “Did you think of taking a job in India?”

“You know, I like my job, Manasi. And I haven’t thought about taking up a job in India. It will be very different to work in India.” Manasi nodded in

agreement and he went ahead, “I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

After a few moments of silence he asked, “Aren’t you eager to return to the US? To a good job? To our friend circle? To our active life?”

“What do your parents think?” She asked.

“They think we should have gotten married by now!” He gave her a big smile.

“Hmmm. So after April?” Manasi said almost to herself.

“Three months!” Rakesh squeezed her hand.

They both got quiet and sat back as the waiter came and served their food. Rakesh looked at the food and gave a big smile, “This looks so good and will taste wonderful. But it will be so full of fat!” Then he looked at Manasi, “I’m going to start a good fitness regime as soon as I get back! India vacations always mess up with that.”

Both of them started eating but Manasi was not focused on food. She was thinking about her unwillingness to saying yes to an April wedding. Was it possible that she was reluctant because this would be a big change once more? Would she actually feel better after going back to the US?

Rakesh noticed she was quiet and teased her by saying, “Come on darling! You also can get back in shape in three months!”

Manasi looked at him and gave an absent minded smile. While in US, she had worked out regularly and played a lot of tennis. Since she had come back, except for the yoga that she did thanks to the yoga instructor that her mother had hired to come home four times a week and some walks that she managed off and on, she hardly got any exercise. But she had not put on weight. In fact, she had lost some. Thanks to the tensions at work!

Throughout the meal, Rakesh kept chatting. Manasi made a lot of effort to be happy and to give appropriate response to him.

When they were done with their food, the waiter reappeared and asked if they wanted any desert. Manasi ordered an ice cream because she knew it would please Rakesh. He was pleased and ordered one for himself.

When they were digging into their ice creams, Rakesh said, “So do you think you could learn some cooking in the next three months?”

Manasi looked up to see if he was joking. But he seemed all serious. “What do you mean? I can do some cooking.”



“But it’s kind of very basic, right? I wanted you to learn a few things?”

“What things?” They had been together for long enough for him to know what she could do and what she couldn’t. He had never before said anything about her lack of cooking skills. Why now?

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s just that my mother says that you should at least be able to make good Marathi food daily. You can’t make rotis, that upset her. So if you could just learn to make rotis...”

Manasi put her spoon down carefully. “You want me to learn to make rotis? To please your mom?”

Rakesh gave a quick smile before saying, “I know. It shouldn’t really matter, right? I mean we are not going to live with her. We’ll be in the US. What we do should not really be a big deal. But it does matter to her. And I got thinking about it, you know. Just because I fell in love with you and we decided to marry, why should my mother lose out? Why shouldn’t she get the kind of daughter-in-law she had hoped to get?” He reached out to hold her hand again. “You understand, right? We should be able to please her right? This is a small thing, after all.”

Manasi felt very uneasy. She pulled out her hand from his, “My father would like for you to stay back in India and help me run NDS.” Her father had never said that, but she knew that he had always wanted her to come back to India. And now that she was running NDS, he would definitely like it a lot if Rakesh was to help her in that.

“Oh come on! Why are you making it a big issue?” Rakesh had clearly got upset. He made an effort to cool down and said, “Manasi, please. I don’t want us to fight. You got upset. I can understand. But don’t become unreasonable, darling! You have a lot of time to be a good cook.” He smiled, “You are a fast learner. In no time you will be making good rotis. Someday, we will look back at this episode and laugh about it!”

Manasi sighed and said, “Rakesh. It is not about whether I am quick learner or not. It is not even about the rotis. But you are telling me to mold myself because you want me to become the kind of woman your mother would like as her daughter-in-law.” She looked at him but he kept quiet. “Maybe you should have checked if I was the kind of girl your mother would like as a daughter-in-law before falling in love with me.” She gave a sad smile, “Maybe we should have talked about this before getting into a serious relationship.”

Then suddenly, she realised that it was not about the rotis and about what he wanted her to do and why he wanted that. It was simply that she wanted something different. Something different than what was planned earlier. Something different than what he still seemed to want. She pulled out her engagement ring and put it on the table. That obviously upset Rakesh. “What the hell is this? Why are you taking the ring off?”

“Rakesh, I think it’s best to ...”

“You are breaking off our engagement because we had an argument?”

She looked at him smiled a little and said, “I am really, really sorry. And it is not because of this argument. I am breaking off our engagement because I have changed. I want something different than what you want.” He looked at her with anger and confusion. She reached out to hold his hand and said, “I don’t want to go back to the US. I want to live in India and run NDS. I don’t want to hurt you, but you don’t want to move back to India. At least right now. And, after last seven months, I really don’t want to leave India. NDS has become very important to me.”

Rakesh pulled out his hand, “More important than me. More important than our relationship!”

“Like being in the US is more important to you than our relationship. You don’t want to move to India to be with me.”

“When we got involved, when we decided to get married, we had not talked about moving to India. It was understood that we will live in the US.”

“Yes. True. But now I want to do something different. We want different things now. We want to be on the opposite sides of the globe...”

Rakesh didn’t say anything. Manasi knew he was hurt and angry. She was surprised that she could be calm about it. Though she had not consciously thought about it, her decision wasn’t really sudden. Her subconscious mind had been working on this for some time.

“I am sorry,” she said again.

“Are you sure about this?” Rakesh asked her.

“Yes.”

“What do you expect me to do now? Just accept the breakup? Treat it like a bump on the head and go on?”

“I don’t know the right answer. But I hope we can continue to be friends,”

Manasi said softly.

Rakesh looked at her angrily and then suddenly got up. He stood there looking at her for a few seconds, then turned around and walked off.

Manasi's first instinct was to run after him. But then she thought better of it. She had a sip of water and looked around feeling embarrassed. The coffee shop was not crowded but Manasi noticed a few folks looking in her direction without wanting to be obvious about it.

She waited to pay the bill and then walked out to the lobby. Rakesh was nowhere to be seen. She asked at the reception if Rakesh had checked in and when they assured her that he had, she called him on his cell phone. But he didn't pick up the call. She tried once again with the same result.

What should she do?

She walked across the lobby and sat down on one of the sofas there. In the next hour, she tried calling him three times but he didn't pick up.

Finally, she messaged him, 'I wish you would give me a chance to explain. I didn't come to Mumbai thinking I'll break off the engagement. I kept feeling uneasy, but didn't know why. But when we started talking about setting the date and you talked about what you wanted me to do to please your mom, it suddenly became crystal clear. I am not the same girl that you fell in love with. She would have probably thought about this differently. Last seven months have been a very difficult, very strange and yet very fulfilling time for me. I am a changed person today. And I want to be here and run NDS. You have been my best friend, Rakesh and I am really sorry that by my decision, I ended up hurting you. And I hope you will forgive me and that you will think of me as a friend.'

She then got thinking about what she should do next. She could spend the two days in Mumbai by herself, pretending to her cousin, to her parents, that things were going as per the plan. She didn't want to tell her cousin about her broken engagement, before telling her parents. As it was, the broken engagement will get talked about in the extended family, but she didn't want that to start before she had explained it to her parents. She looked at the time. It was 3:13 p.m. She could leave the bag at her cousin's, after all it only contained a few clothes and her toiletries and go directly to CST to catch the Deccan Queen back to Pune. She decided she would call Anju tai on Sunday evening and tell her that she would pick her bag up the next time she was in Mumbai.

By the time she boarded the Deccan Queen at five p.m. at CST, Rakesh had not called or replied to her message. She hoped he will get over the anger and the pain she had caused him and that they would be friends. On the train, the decision she had made slowly sunk in. She had changed the course of her life from what she had planned once again. The last time she had done that, it was because of her father's sudden illness and it was meant to be temporary. Now, she had changed the course because she felt differently about things and in a more of a permanent way. She kept remembering many of her conversations with Rakesh, the things they had done together, the fun they had had as friends and as lovers. She felt terribly sad; felt her eyes tear up. And yet, she knew what she had done was right. She didn't want to give up NDS now.

It was 9:30 p.m. when she opened the gate and walked to the main door of the house. When her mother opened the door, she looked taken aback. "Manu? What happened? What are you doing here?"

Manasi smiled and said, "Let me at least come in. Is Daddy awake? I would like to talk to you together."

Ten minutes later in Upendra's room Manasi stood by his bed and looked at the three anxious faces. Akka and her mother looked really worried. Her father was watchful.

"I have broken off my engagement with Rakesh because I don't want to go back to the US. I want to live here." She looked at her mother and then at Akka. Then she looked at her father and said, "I want to live here and run NDS."

None of them reacted right away. After a few moments, Anupama said, "That is a big decision Manu!"

Manasi nodded, "Yes, Mamma. But this is what I want."

Upendra patted on the bed asking Manasi to sit down. When she did, he said, "I always wanted you to return to India. I always wanted you to work at NDS. But I didn't want you to do that at the cost of your dreams; at the cost of your marriage."

"Daddy, it is not like that! My dreams have changed. Being here, running NDS has become more important to me now."

"If you are sure about that, then I am actually very happy," Upendra said

and smiled. Manasi looked at his smile and realised how much this meant to him. “Happy that you will be here in India and happy that you will be running NDS.”

“What about marriage?” Akka asked. “You are 29 years old, Manu!”

Manasi turned to look at Akka, but didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. Upendra held her hand and said, “Akka, I am sure we can find a good husband for her here in India.”

“I don’t want to think about marriage, right now!” Manasi said feeling agitated.

“No. Of course not right away,” Anupama said. Manasi turned to look at her mother and saw an understanding in her eyes; that made her feel better.

Manasi unexpectedly had a free day on her hands. She had not slept well; she kept thinking about Rakesh and cried some quiet tears for end of one of her most important relationships. She stayed in bed late and had a leisurely breakfast. She spent time chatting with Akka in her room. Akka was fondly reminiscing about Manasi and Rachana’s childhood when Anupama came over with Manasi’s phone in her hand, “Manu, you left your phone in the dining room. It rang couple of times.”

Manasi took the phone quickly; maybe Rakesh had calmed down and called her! But it was not him. The number didn’t look familiar to her, but there were two missed calls from the number so she dialled back.

It was an old school friend, who lived in the US but was visiting Pune. She was trying to see who all could join her for lunch. Manasi accepted the invitation and ended the call, “Mamma, you remember Shubha?”

Anupama had heard the one sided conversation and guessed correctly, “You are going out for lunch with her and three other girls from school.”

Manasi met her school friends at a fancy restaurant on Baner road. Apart from Shubha, who lived in the US and was in India on vacation, others were all based in Pune. Manasi talked little; she looked at the four girls who had been her close friends in school and happily listened to their conversation about school times. Neeta, was a house wife to a busy doctor, she was married the longest - six years, and had a three year old daughter. Anila worked in the bank, was married for over two years and was now pregnant.

Rajeshri worked as a teacher, was married for four years but didn't have a child yet. Shubha herself had got married last year. "It was an arranged marriage. But since both of us were in the bay area, we got to spend a lot of time together before getting married," she explained.

"What about you Manasi, don't you plan to get married?" Neeta asked.

Manasi gave a bright smile and said, "Of course. At some point. Right now I'm busy with NDS." She was glad that these girls didn't know about Rakesh or that she had been engaged. She also couldn't help wonder if time was passing her by. She was sure about wanting to run NDS, but she also wanted to have a husband and children. Most of the girls her age were married, even guys her age were married. She made an effort to shake off that train of thought and turned her attention to the conversation taking place around the table.

"We should keep in touch; not wait for Shubha to come to Pune; we are all in Pune itself," Neeta said and Anila immediately agreed. By the time they got ready to leave the restaurant, plan was already made for the four Pune residents to meet in a month's time.

They were climbing down the stairs when Manasi saw Jay approaching the restaurant. She was wondering if she had to introduce him to her friends, when he noticed her. He came over and asked, "Manasi? What are you doing here? I thought you were going to be in Mumbai today?"

Manasi didn't want to talk about it in front of her school friends who, she realised were listening to the conversation and looking at Jay full of curiosity.

"Change of plans," she said as cheerfully as she could and quickly added, "How is Mai?"

Jay probably realised that she didn't want to talk about it because he nodded, "She is doing alright. Why don't you come over and see her tomorrow if you have the time?"

"I would like that!" Manasi said sincerely.

"Come for lunch."

They agreed to to that and Manasi was turning to her friends thinking that she should introduce Jay when a tall, beautiful woman in well fitted jeans walked up to Jay and asked, "Jay can I keep this backpack in your car?"

"Of course," he smiled.

Manasi became aware that her friends were getting restless, so she said, “Bye Jay, Ill see you tomorrow then,” and walked towards the parking with her friends following her. She couldn’t help notice the curious look the tall woman gave her. She herself felt quite curious about the woman. Who was she? Manasi guessed she was in her thirties. Was that Bindu by any chance? The woman who Jay had mentioned as the one who had taught him a lot?

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Late afternoon, when Manasi mentioned Jay's invitation to Anupama, she was very cautious, "Talk to Daddy. I don't mind you going over, but I don't want him to get upset by this." So, in the evening, while she was having coffee in her father's room, she casually said, "I ran into Jay today and he has invited me over to his place for lunch. Mai has come to Pune a few days ago."

Upendra was quiet for a while. Then he put down his cup carefully and asked, "She used to work at Joshis' place?"

"Yes," Manasi confirmed. "And she was very nice to Rachu and me."

"She is recovering from a major illness," Anupama chipped in.

Upendra who had always talked about status and class, surprisingly just nodded in understanding. His next words made the mother and daughter look at each other astonished, "Maybe we should call them over for tea sometime."

Jay woke up unusually early and found himself thinking about Manasi. Why did she come back early? Could she and Rakesh have had a fight? She had returned from Aurangabad a day earlier as well. She had tried to mask it, but he could see that she had been upset when she returned from Aurangabad. Yesterday, he could not figure out her mood at all. She was with a group of friends and seemed in a hurry to leave.

What if she had had a fight with Rakesh? What would it mean?

He went into the kitchen and as expected found Mai there. Mai was taking something out from the refrigerator but looked up when he approached. She smiled and asked, "What are you doing up this early?"

"What are you doing? You should not be working. You need to rest," he took the vessel from her hand and put it on the kitchen platform. Then slowly walked her to the dining area and made her sit on a dining chair.

"I have prepared tea," Mai told him. When he nodded, she said, "Let me clean and cut the vegetables at least. You know I like cooking and working in the kitchen. It actually makes me feel better."

"Yes Mai, but the doctor has advised not to do anything for now," Jay said as he poured tea for the two of them and put a cup in front of Mai before



sitting down at the table.

“I thought of making Gulab Jamuns at home. Manu liked them a lot when she was small,” Mai said with a fond smile for the girl she remembered from twenty years ago.

“You are not doing anything of the kind! Can Rukhmini bai do it?” Rukhmini was the woman Jay had hired to help Mai at home. She came in around 9 in the morning and left only around 7 in the evening. Mai had said she felt strange, having a ‘maid’ since she herself had been one. But then she liked having Rukhmini around. With Jay being away from home so much and many times working even when at home, Mai was glad to have company.

“I don’t know,” Mai sipped her tea slowly.

“I’ll get some from Chitale.”

“But you will be busy right from 10:00,” Mai pointed out.

“Yes,” how had he forgotten that? “Send Rukhmini bai,” he said closing the topic.

Anupama was in exceptionally good mood on Sunday morning. Akka noticed and mentioned the same to Manasi, “Something has really pleased your mother. Considering that just day before, she was depressed because you broke off your engagement, I wonder what it is that she is so happy about!”

Manasi hugged Akka and said, “I think daddy’s progress makes her happy.” Manasi herself was very happy with her father’s progress. It wasn’t just about his physical progress. He looked at things differently. He didn’t get upset about small things. He wasn’t being so stubborn anymore. Yesterday he had also demonstrated that he wasn’t concerned about so called ‘status’ or ‘class’ anymore.

Manasi parked her car on Prabhat road and walked across to Jay’s bungalow. She was carrying a box of *Kaju Katli* with her. She vaguely remembered how her grand mother had sent the same sweet to Joshis; how Mai and Jay had never tasted it before that. How then Mai had explained to her how there were a lot of things in the city that they had never seen or even heard of in their village.

At Jay’s bungalow, Manasi pushed the gate open and it made a lot of noise.

She closed the gate, again making the same noise and turned to find Jay standing at the Veranda with a smile.

“Hi,” Manasi smiled. “Your hinges need oiling.”

Jay nodded, “Yes. And that gate too.”

Laughing at his joke she climbed the three steps of the veranda and stopped in her tracks. There were two people seated on the swing. One of them was the beautiful woman she had seen with Jay yesterday. Next to her was a handsome man with twinkling eyes. Jay walked few steps to stand next to her and said, “Manasi, these folks are helping me in the search for my brother. Neil Bhargav and his wife Ishani Sohoni. And this is Manasi Date. She runs NDS, a software company.”

The two of them got up and as he came forward to shake Manasi’s hand, Neil Bhargav with a mischievous smile said, “Detective Ishani Sohoni and her husband Neil Bhargav, is probably more appropriate introduction.”

Manasi liked detective Neil Bhargav. She shook his hand and said, “Pleased to meet you Ishani’s husband Neil.”

Neil laughed easily and said, “Likewise.”

Manasi then turned to shake Ishani’s hand. Ishani smiled warmly and said, “Hi. Jay would have introduced us yesterday itself if it hadn’t been for my backpack and your friends.”

Yesterday, Manasi had noted that Ishani was a tall and beautiful woman. Today she felt the warmth of her smile and couldn’t help like her.

She wondered if she was disturbing their conversation. She had arrived half an hour earlier than the time suggested by Jay. Should she go in and look for Mai? She turned to look at Jay and found him watching her with an unreadable expression.

“Should I go in and say hello to Mai?” she asked.

Jay turned to the two detectives, excused himself and accompanied her inside. They found Mai at the dining table and Jay said, “Mai, see if you recognise Manasi.”

Mai turned slowly and Manasi moved closer with a warm smile. “Manu,” Mai said. “It has been many years. I am glad you came over. Come, sit by me. Let me take a look at you.”

Manasi sat in the chair next to Mai and then handed the box of sweets to

Mai. Mai seemed frail, not how Manasi remembered her at all. She wore a scarf around her head; her face looked swollen and her eyes were tired. The after effects of chemo were obvious. And yet, her eyes were not full of pain and sadness as they used to be twenty years ago, Manasi reflected.

Mai looked at Manasi closely making Manasi feel a little awkward.

“Mai,” Jay said and both women turned to look at him. “Can you send another round of tea for us on the veranda?”

“OK,” Mai replied and then with a worried look asked, “What are they saying?”

Jay looked undecided but then as if he had made up his mind, said, “Why don’t you come and join for tea? Let us all talk about it.”

Jay walked out to the veranda and pulled the main door shut behind him. When Neil and Ishani looked at him askance, he said, “We need to close the NDS topic for now. Mai and Manasi will be joining us shortly. Let us talk about the search now.”

Neil nodded in understanding and Ishani said, “We head back to Mumbai this evening. I’ll call you tomorrow to continue that conversation.”

“Call in the evening,” Jay wanted to take the call at home. As he sat down on the low, wide wall of the veranda, he said, “But we do want to shadow Vikram for sure.”

Ten minutes later, when Manasi accompanied Mai out to the veranda and helped her serve the tea, Neil, Ishani and Jay were discussing what more could be done for Prakash’s search.

Over tea, Manasi understood that there was no further progress in the search. What they had learnt from the priest of the small temple was all they had. They had not been able to find out anything more from anywhere else.

Neil sipped his tea and nodded in approval. Then he casually said, “One thing we can try is give an announcement in the local newspapers about the missing person. It works in some cases.”

Ishani looked at Neil shaking her head, “But normally such announcements

have a photo of the missing person. In this case, the only photos are from twenty years ago.”

Neil looked at Mai’s sad expression and said, “Don’t lose hope. It can work.”

Manasi didn’t see any hope and she understood that the detectives themselves weren’t hopeful. But she saw how sad Mai felt thinking it was hopeless and then she looked at Jay to find him looking at Mai with concern. She was seated next to Mai, so it was easy for her to reach out and put her arm around Mai’s shoulder, “That could work, you know!” She said making an effort to sound full of hope. “I have seen full page announcements and they are difficult to miss. Maybe he himself will see the announcement!”

“We’ll go statewide. Full page!” Neil and Ishani said almost in unison. Manasi noticed how Neil gave Ishani a quick smile and bumped his shoulder against hers before turning to Jay, “On Sunday. And we run it for a few weeks.”

“Think about it,” Ishani chipped in, looking at Jay.

Jay nodded, “Let us do that.”

They discussed what all news papers to cover and when to start the campaign and Manasi noticed that Mai already looked better.

After the list of news papers and the matter was agreed upon, it was Ishani who said, “I would suggest giving the announcement in Mai’s name. For two reasons, firstly, an elderly lady calling for her son would have people reacting more positively. Secondly, Jay, if it is in your name, and people know or find out that you are this rich NRI, then people might claim to be Prakash in hope of monetary benefits. Of course, the contact number we give to call will not be yours; we will be screening all the respondents but it would still mean a lot less heartache if we don’t have to deal with possible impostors.”

Jay nodded and turned to look at Mai, “Mai? I think that makes sense.”

So it was agreed that the announcement will be given in Mai’s name. Jay then handed over an old photograph of Prakash and a pen drive, “All the photos we had are scanned and on this pen drive. You can use this one or any of the ones on the pen drive. They are not very good quality, I am afraid,” he said somberly.

After about an hour, when Manasi sat down to have lunch with Mai and

Jay, she noticed that Mai was in a very good mood. She ignored Jay's protests and served food in their plates herself. She ignored Manasi's protests and served her four *Gulab Jamuns* and said, "Manu, when you were small, you used to insist that you be served at least four! I remember."

Jay laughed pleasantly, "She is older and wiser now, Mai. And she does not like to be called Manu anymore."

"Like you don't like to be called Deepu," Mai pointed out. "But I can only call him Deepu," she told Manasi. "I hope you don't mind if I call you Manu."

"No, I don't," Manasi confirmed smilingly. "I called him Deepu by mistake once and he got really upset!" She informed Mai.

Jay gave an annoyed look and called out, "Rukhmini bai can you bring the chapatis?"

The food was good and conversation quite pleasant. They all talked about the old times and from time to time, Mai asked Manasi about her parents, grandparents, sister, her education and other things.

When Jay chipped in to say, "Now she is engaged to be married," Manasi looked at him and shook her head not knowing what exactly to say. He noticed her discomfort with the topic and left it at that.

Mai didn't seem to notice her discomfort or that Jay had dropped the subject suddenly. She found it interesting and pressed the topic ahead, "Manu, you should get married soon. When I was your age, Deepu was ten years old!" Looking away, sombrely she added, "And Pakya was five." She then turned to Manasi, "I don't know why we didn't look for him earlier! Is it too late?"

"No Mai," Manasi said and looked at Jay, helplessly.

"Mai," Jay said gently, "We decided to do everything possible for the search but not look back and wonder if we could have found him earlier, right?"

Manasi could sympathise with Mai; she could see how painful this was for her. She could also understand Jay's predicament. She struggled to find the right thing to say, "Mai, my grandmother always says that everything has its time. When it is time, things happen. I am sure same is the case with search for Prakash. This must be the right time."

Manasi found Mai's expression change; she looked hopeful and relieved.

Jay's look, on the other hand was inscrutable.

She turned to Mai with a smile when Mai said, "Let the God do that!"

Mai then changed the subject, "See, how life has brought us all together again! You and Jay working together! Who would have thought?"

Yes, life was truly amazing. Manasi smiled and said, "We were good friends then and we are good friends again."

"Manu, this illness of mine has made me think about death."

"But you are getting better now aren't you?" Manasi asked.

"Yes. That is what the doctors tell me." Mai sighed. Then she gave Jay a look and turned back to Manasi, "He does not like me talking about my illness or death but as I tell him, there are only two things I want to see, after that, I wouldn't mind dieing."

"Mai," Jay said in a tone of warning.

But Mai ignored him, "First thing I would like is to find Prakash! I told Deepu to do whatever he could to find his brother!" Manasi turned to look at Jay and noticed that he didn't look very comfortable. But his expression was watchful. Manasi turned back to Mai as she continued, "The second thing I would like to see is for Deepu to get married!" She looked at Manasi earnestly, "Manu, there is a very nice girl, who is willing to marry him. My sister-in-law's niece..."

"She is only nineteen years old, Mai!" Jay cut in angrily. "You can't seriously expect me to marry a girl, half my age!" He had stopped eating. "I thought we had already settled this matter!" He looked upset. Then he took in Mai's expression and said gently, "Mai, let us discuss this later."

But Mai would have none of that! She turned to Manasi, "In our community by his age, men have children who come up to father's shoulders! It is his fault that all the marriageable girls are so much younger than him! If he had got married even ten years ago, he would have got a good wife who was not half his age!" Manasi felt very uncomfortable with this conversation. Mai probably noticed that. She sighed and turned her face away. Then she dabbed at her eyes with her pallu and started eating quietly.

All three of them ate quietly for a few minutes and then Mai said, "Manu, please tell your friend that he should get married. Is it unreasonable at all? That his mother wants to see him married? Tell me."

Manasi smiled more to herself. Then she looked straight at Mai and said, "I

think, it is best left to him. If he wants to get married he will. No one should have to marry because someone else wants that person to marry. Not even the mother.”

There was a stunned silence at the table. Manasi had said what she thought but now wondered how Mai was going to take it; or Jay for that matter. She first stole a look at Jay. He was looking at her with a smile. And was that admiration? Then she looked at Mai. She had a stunned look on her face. She then shook her head and almost smiled. “Today’s generation!” She said in mock exasperation.

After that all of them focused on food and talked about non consequential and so non controversial topics such as the changing weather, cultural differences between the US and India and current lot of politicians.

It was past 4, when Jay walked Manasi to her car. The weather was quite pleasant and the small lane as well as Prabhat road were remarkably quiet.

“Thank you,” Jay said solemnly after they had walked some distance from his place.

“For stating that no one should have to marry because someone else was asking them to?”

“Yes. And stating it so easily and so simply,” Jay smiled. There was clear admiration in his voice.

“Hmmm,” Manasi was pleased with what he said. “I really believe that.”

Jay nodded and then asked, “So what is the deal with your and Rakesh then?”

Manasi looked at him and wondered if he was sounding annoyed about it.

When she didn’t immediately reply, Jay stopped walking, forcing her to do the same and just looked at her.

She sighed and said, “I broke off the engagement on Friday.” Then she ended up telling him detailed account of it. How Rakesh was asking her to be more like the kind of daughter-in-law his mother wanted and how that really annoyed her. But how in the end she realised it was not about that at all. “I realised that NDS has come to mean a lot to me. I don’t want to leave that and go to the US. And Rakesh does not want to relocate to India. Definitely not at this point.”

Jay had guessed that she had broken off her engagement from the way she

had reacted when he had told Mai that she was engaged. This was only a confirmation. If she wanted to live in India and run NDS, it was definitely good for NDS. All along, he had been telling himself that he wanted her to be eager to marry Rakesh and go to the US, so that she will be willing to let him take over NDS. So now, when she confirmed that she had broken off her engagement, why did he feel elated?

He suddenly became aware that Manasi expected some kind of a response from him. He had to clear his throat before he could say, "I am sure you made the right decision. And for NDS, it is great news that you will be at the helm." He waited a few moments before adding, "But breaking off a relationship is painful." When Manasi looked at him, he looked closely at her, "How are you doing?"

Manasi realised that he understood her state of mind much better than her parents. She nodded and smiled a little, "I'm actually quite OK. Just sad that he was so angry and hurt. I wish we could have parted as friends."

They had reached her car and as she opened the driver's door, Jay patted her gently and said, "Give him some time. Rejection is not easy to handle." He then smiled before adding, "Especially for men."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Breaking off the engagement didn't change her everyday life in anyway. She had written Rakesh a long email, about a week after he went back but he didn't acknowledged that. From time to time she saw him go online on Skype and hoped he would talk to her, but he didn't. After a month, she stopped hoping for that as well.

Life went on; things kept happening...

By the time February arrived, her father was able to walk independently, speak almost clearly and was taking interest in a lot of things, including cooking. He continued to surprise the three women and was generally in a good mood.

After he started moving about the house, Dates invited Jay and Mai over one evening. Manasi was nervous when they came over; she was unsure about how Upendra would behave with them and if he was rude, how Jay would take it. But it turned out to be a pleasant evening with both Upendra and Jay being their most charming selves. In fact, the two men seemed to agree on varied topics from politics to business leadership and from India's space program to how to solve major issues India faced. Akka was really pleased with the visit though she didn't comment on it. Anupama and Manasi talked about it a few times. They could not believe that Upendra could be so polite and so charming with someone he had had a lot of reservation about earlier.

They were even more surprised when one evening, Jay stopped on his way home just to chat with Upendra and Upendra talked to him about his manufacturing plant.

By mid Feb, Upendra was almost normal and eager to start working. He called Niranjana over and Niranjana seemed eager to come and talk to him. Manasi made sure that she was not home when Niranjana stopped by and so she heard about the conversation between the two from her mother the next day, "Daddy told him things were changing. That he felt he could not go back and run NDS now. That you were a better person to run NDS than he is ever going to be. He then mentioned that the changes must be difficult for old people like Niranjana. Niranjana of course agreed." Manasi was listening attentively. "Then Niranjana mentioned that the changes seemed too big

sometimes. That the whole approach seemed different. But he agreed that some of those were at least good,” Anupama said giving Manasi an encouraging smile. “Then he asked daddy if it would be OK if he was to leave. That he had been thinking about starting something on his own. But had wondered if it would seem like he was not providing the required support at NDS, when needed.” Manasi couldn’t understand that. She had always felt that she was not getting any support from Niranjana. Did he really think he was providing support at NDS in any way? “Daddy told him that he should go ahead and put in his papers.” Anupama concluded.

The day after his conversation with Upendra, Niranjana put down his papers and then went out of his way to ensure his transition would not affect projects in his business unit. Hopefully they would be able to find the right person as his replacement in a short time. Otherwise, Manasi was going to handle Niranjana’s division herself till NDS could find the right person as Niranjana’s replacement.

Work on AccellaFab’s product for Indian market was growing. High level, important requirements were drafted and a development team had started working on it. Mayank was looking into the project himself and Jay was quite happy with the overall progress.

Chandrika had happily agreed to head the new Training department. The charter she had defined for the training department and the role of its head had undergone revision after Manasi had discussed these with Vikram and Jay.

Jay had also stepped in to help with interviewing for senior positions, Niranjana’s replacement as well as someone to head the HR function.

Ritu, an old school friend had reached out to Manasi and told her that she was moving from Bengaluru to Pune and looking for a HR position. NDS needed a person with exactly that background and though they had originally wanted to bring in someone more senior, after interviewing Ritu, both Vikram and Jay had said NDS should hire her.

Manasi had come to depend on Jay’s guidance on practically all the important decisions she needed to take regarding NDS. Furthermore even Vikram had started talking to Jay regarding NDS matters. Manasi was really

glad that he was around and was able to provide her the much needed support, support that she had missed all this while. She had stopped consulting Abhijit kaka now.

However, on personal front, he seemed to make an effort to keep her at a distance. He had been so friendly, asking her to join him for dinner on new year's eve, then calling her over to meet Mai and then suddenly, he had started avoiding spending time with her outside NDS. She didn't understand that. It almost seemed like he was happy being a close friend when she was engaged to someone else. But now that she was a single woman, he didn't want to.

She liked him; a lot. And she was attracted to him. She now acknowledged that she had felt drawn to him right from the first day of the AccellaFab visit; she just had not understood it. The fact that he tried to maintain a distance confused her. And it hurt. She avoided giving her feelings for him a name and yet she couldn't deny them. Had he guessed how she felt about him? Did it make him think her fickle? After all it was not even two months since she had broken off her engagement to Rakesh.

She had felt guilty, when she realised that she didn't feel sad as she was expected to after breaking off the engagement. She had felt even more guilty when she had realised that ever since Jay had entered her life, she had thought more about him than Rakesh and looked forward to being with him more than with Rakesh. She had struggled with herself over what she felt was her disloyalty and tried to analyze why it was so. Finally, she had accepted that she had not been in love with Rakesh really.

She had been over twenty six years old when she met Rakesh and he was two years older than her. Both of them had started to get a push from their families about getting married. They came from similar background and had similar journeys in the US. Their friends as well as families had thought they were a perfect match in every possible way. Pushed by the environment and their desire to fit in with the society and norms, it had been easy to consider themselves in love with each other; to decide to get married. After getting engaged, they spent a lot of time together, doing a lot of the typical activities expected of engaged couples; they stayed over at each others' places and had sex. But Manasi was not madly in love with Rakesh. She never had been. She

suspected that same was true for him as well. Like many others she saw around, they were headed for an arranged marriage, based on looks, education, family background and family approval. Just that instead of their parents taking the initiative or meeting through a matrimony site, they had met through friends.

When she absolved herself from the guilt, she found herself thinking about Jay even more. Sometimes, she lost the track of the conversation in meetings and sometimes she would sit in her office and stare out of the window lost in thought till someone came by. A few times she had caught him watching her carefully but as soon as she looked in his direction, he had looked away and then talked about something related to NDS. Those instances, the look in his eyes stayed with her. His looks confused her further. She had read an admiration and a longing in his looks. Or was that only because she wanted to see that in his eyes? Was she seeing a lot more than what was really there?

While he made an effort to keep a distance between them personally, Jay was more than happy to help and guide her at NDS. Few times when she was upset at his most recent effort to keep a distance, she had been tempted to decline his offer of help. Then her loyalty to NDS had prevailed and she had ended up turning to him for guidance and support.

In the last week of February, on a bright, sunny morning, Jay came to her cabin looking for coffee. Something he had not done in a while. Unsure of why he was there, Manasi started the coffee and waited for him to say something.

He watched her make the coffee and when she didn't say anything, he stated, "I am going out of town for a while."

"Oh?" Manasi said showing only a mild curiosity though she was able to think of thousand things she would have liked to ask him. Then, as if that was the only question she could think of, she asked, "What about Mai?"

"She wants to go to Hatmali, our village. So I am taking her there."

Manasi turned to look at him at that. Encouraged, Jay said, "I haven't gone back since I left it more than 20 years ago."

Manasi could understand how big this must be for him. And he had come to talk to her about it. She couldn't stay annoyed and distant anymore. "But you have to go at some point right?" She said gently.

Jay nodded and sighed, “The sooner the better. I know.”

Manasi wished there was some way she could make this easier for him. But he had to deal with this in any case. Like he said, the sooner he did this, the better.

As she placed the coffee in front of him, he said, “Then I’ll go to Adol, my uncle’s village. Primarily to drop Mai there.”

“Oh! Why?” Manasi was surprised to hear that. She had visited Mai a few times after the Sunday lunch, which now seemed a long time ago. Mai had seemed happy to be with Jay. She had undergone her last chemo at Ruby hall clinic about a month back and was now looking forward to start doing things her way at home, most importantly in the kitchen.

“There is a wedding to plan. My aunt, Mami, is keen that Mai go for the wedding.”

Manasi was very curious because Jay was looking a little uneasy. “Whose wedding is it?”

“Mami’s niece,” Jay replied and Manasi realised why he looked uneasy.

“The girl who is half your age?” Manasi could not help her smile when she asked him teasingly.

“The same!” Manasi laughed at his emphasis and encouraged he went on, “Mai was very unhappy but finally about a month back told Mami not to hope that I will marry Viju. And that it would be best to find a suitable boy for her pronto!”

“Viju,” Manasi said with a smile. Then she looked at him and impishly said, “See, it could have been Jay weds Viju.”

“No. It could never have been that.” He said in all seriousness.

Manasi nodded, “But in a month they were able to find a suitable boy? And when is the wedding?”

“That is how things work in small places. Wedding is after three months. But Mami said she wanted Mai to be there for all the preparations as well and Mai seemed eager to go.”

Was he upset that Mai was eager to go? Why was Mai so eager to go? Was it because the efforts for Prakash’s search were not bearing any fruit? In the last one and half month, full page statements were run in all the Marathi news papers of the state twice. The first time there wasn’t even one call. The

second time, there were a few calls but the callers seemed interested in finding out who was behind the campaign and didn't have any information about Prakash. The interest in the campaign was something that Neil Bhargav had predicted right at the start.

As the full page statements were causing curiosity about the campaigner, after the second time, it was decided not to run the statement again. At least not for a while. After that, Neil's team had gone back to asking more questions to people in Hatmali, near the temple and other places.

"How is Mai?" Manasi asked tentatively.

"Health wise, she is doing well. But she is very unhappy about our inability to find Prakash. Last week, she was suggesting we go to this astrologer in Satara that she has heard about. When I refused, she didn't talk to me for two days." Jay stated as a matter of fact but Manasi could feel his frustration. No one was able to think of any new way of going about the search and Mai was getting desperate.

"I'm really sorry for Mai." Manasi felt sorry for Jay too, but she assumed that he wouldn't like her saying that. "So you are going to be gone for a week or so? Should we send you the updated design documents for review while you are gone or wait till you get back?" Work on AccellaFab's product was going full speed.

Jay cleared his throat and sat up to say, "Send it on email. I will be gone for much longer than a week."

"Oh?"

"From Adol, I am directly going to Mumbai and flying to the US."

Since he was sure that NDS team could work in the model he wanted them to and the project had got started, was he leaving India? She didn't like the thought of that. She had got so used to having him around. Even when he was being distant and she was getting annoyed, having him around was a real comfort. She depended on him, for advice and suggestions. More than everything else, she liked being with him. She liked that he was part of her everyday life.

"Are you leaving?" She asked wanting to sound casual but she could hear the tremor in her own voice.

He looked at her steadily but didn't reply right away. She couldn't hold his eyes and looked away, scared that she might end up shedding tears.

“Not leaving,” he said finally. “I should be back in a month, I think.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jay had been travelling within India earlier, but those times, he was gone for couple of days or three at a time. Now that he was gone for a month, Manasi missed him even more than she had thought she would. She looked for excuses to email him and then waited for his replies. The replies were always focused only on the NDS matter or the AccellaFab project. The personal comments she made and questions she asked were sometimes ignored and sometimes replied to tersely. When she asked if he liked being back in Puget Sound he replied with, ‘Yeah’ and when she asked if he missed India, he didn’t reply at all.

When he asked AccellaFab project team to call him, Manasi joined the call, though she had nothing to contribute.

That is when she realised that she was obsessed with him and decided to make an effort to step back. It would not be good for NDS if she started behaving like a besotted fool over Jay. He might be an old friend, but he was also head of AccellaFab, their biggest customer. It would also not be good to her personally.

She spent time wondering if she was basically going through a rebound infatuation after end of her relationship with Rakesh. But she had taken that decision herself and wasn’t trying to find a replacement for him. Jay? Replacement for Rakesh? That made her laugh in spite of her general melancholic mood.

Niranjan had been with NDS right from the start and was at a very senior level in the organisation. As a result, he held a huge chunk of company’s stock options. At end of March, ten days after his last day at NDS, he met with Vikram to tell him that he planned to start his own company so he needed to sell his NDS stock back to the company as quickly as possible. His options were in crores. The only person who had left at this level earlier was Abhijit Deodhar, who was now a board member and had kept the options with him.

There were financial troubles in store for NDS in other ways too. At end of

March, Wills Hopper, or WH, NDS's second largest American customer informed them that they were closing the fifteen people project as they were having financial troubles and had decided to close one of their product line. WH's payment was due for past few months and they were in no position to make that either. As per the contract, NDS could take a legal action, if at all, only after six months of non-payment. WH's monthly billing was in the range of 70 thousand USD. Financially, this was a big blow to NDS.

With loss of a big project, new demands in forms of a training department as well as hiring of more senior people and need to buy back stock options from Niranjana, NDS was suddenly in a tight spot. Upendra pointed out that with all the financial problems and the upcoming salary revisions looking them in face, they didn't have any option but to borrow money. He made a few phone calls to his friends in different banks and asked Manasi to start working with Vikram to put together the required collateral.

The days had started getting very warm and the nights were no longer pleasant. It was close to a year since Upendra's stroke and when Manasi decided to return home. She thought about Puget Sound with longing. This time of the year was beautiful in and around Seattle. She remembered the Microsoft campus and the sunny spring days she had enjoyed on the campus. She wished she could go to the University of Washington and look at the cherry blossom trees that blossomed in spring. But most of all, she wished she could go there and see Jay.

On the first Monday morning of April, Manasi was busy going through the file that they had hastily put together to go to the bank, when she heard a knock on her door and looked up with creased brows. Jay stood outside the door with a smile and a box of chocolates. When he opened the door and came in, Manasi got up with a smile. She felt like hurrying around the table and throwing her arms around his neck so that she could kiss him! She stopped herself with effort and said, "Welcome back!"

He held out the box of chocolates to her, "I hope you like chocolates."

She took the box and noticed they were fancy European chocolates, the kind she liked. "Love these." She told him. "When did you arrive?"

There were various email threads going on with him, but he had not



mentioned anything about when he was arriving. Was it the physical absence of a month that made him seem more distant or was he doing that by choice?

“Last night.” He told her. “How are things here? All OK?”

Manasi would have liked to tell him about the financial woes but she didn’t see him as that friend who she could talk to about anything and everything anymore.

“Yeah. The usual.” She said and forced a smile.

In that week, their collateral was reviewed and approved by Upendra. Upendra knew he needed to step in to take care of the financial issue; that he could not leave it to Manasi to handle alone. When he came over for a meeting with Manasi and Vikram, he was at NDS, for the first time since his stroke.

“Do we need to go to the banks?” Vikram asked. “Should we look at venture capital firms? Or individual investors?”

Manasi had heard about venture capital firms, but didn’t really know how exactly they worked or what they looked for. Upendra was not happy with these new world concepts. He preferred to work with old world establishments like the banks.

“Individual investors? Who would invest so much in us?” Upendra asked. “And why? What would the person get out of it?”

Manasi could think of one person...

“Our financial problems are short term, we are still a good investment. Why would the banks loan us money otherwise?” Vikram argued. “Banks would make us jump through hoops. Too many formalities. Too much time. If an individual investor is keen on us, we could get the required funds more easily and quickly.”

Manasi and Upendra both couldn’t help but agree with him.

“Actually, Jay Randive has shown interest.”

Jay of course knew about Wills Hooper close down. Did he also know about the huge stock options that Niranjana had? And why did he go to Vikram to talk about it? Why didn’t he talk to her?

“How does he know about our troubles?” Her father was asking and he wasn’t pleased.

“Upendra, he got back from the US last week. But he has been in touch with many people even when he was there. He knows many employees well by now. He got to know that Niranjana is leaving and he guessed that Niranjana would have stock options.”

“So did you approach him or he approached you?” Upendra wanted specifics.

“We were talking over coffee and he offered to buy Niranjana’s options and said that the Wills Hopper team can be deployed on AccellaFab right away. Also that he could make some advance payment so that if there is any immediate shortfall, that also can be covered.”

Manasi was stunned to hear how much Jay was offering. She didn’t quite understand it though. Upendra too was obviously taken aback because he asked almost sombrely, “What does he expect in return?”

“Well, he didn’t say anything. But I thought we should offer him a seat on our board.”

“Yes,” Upendra said almost to himself. After few moments of silence, Upendra looked intently at Manasi and asked, “Why do you think he is being so generous?”

She shook her head, “I don’t really know.” Why was he doing it? Was it to help NDS out? To help her out? Did he care that much? But then why was he keeping her at a distance? Somehow, it didn’t all add up.

The meeting ended with the agreement that Upendra should have a conversation with Jay regarding his offer and that in any case a board meeting should be called urgently.

After Upendra left for home, Manasi went to her cabin and while walking by found Jay focused intently on whatever he was doing. She was wondering if she should go over and disturb Jay when he came over to her cabin looking for coffee.

“I have been waiting for over an hour!” He declared with a smile as she started the coffee maker. “You came in late today.”

“No. I was in a meeting,” she didn’t look at him, pretending that she was focused on getting the coffee ready. Then because she just couldn’t pretend anymore, she turned to steadily look at him, “Meeting was with Vikram. He said you have offered to invest in NDS.”

“Yes, I have,” Jay agreed without showing any emotion.

Manasi shook her head and then turned to pour the coffee. When she put a mug in front of him she looked at him again. He was watching her quietly, as if he was waiting for her to say something more.

“Why?”

Jay smiled a little before saying, “Because I think this would be a good investment.”

When Manasi didn’t say anything on that, he elaborated, “You are working in the field that is going to grow. AccellaFab is getting into the Indian market and we need a company like NDS as a partner. With the financial crunch you are facing, if you are anyway going to borrow money, I would like to lend that to you. You can take that as a sign of my keen interest in the firm and in our partnership.”

Manasi looked into her cup as if the coffee would help and then asked, “But, then why didn’t you mention it to me? How come you talked to Vikram?” She felt almost betrayed that he had not offered the support to her directly.

Jay sighed and sat up, “Manasi, I asked you on my return if everything was OK. But you didn’t tell me about NDS’s financial troubles. I would have talked to you if you had mentioned anything at all.” He put his cup on the table, and moved it aside. “I had realised that you must be facing financial challenges but how could I discuss them with you, if you didn’t want to talk to me about those? Then, Vikram and I were having coffee one afternoon when the conversation turned to Niranjana’s exit and multiple challenges NDS has to deal with, with his exit. I knew he would be holding a big chunk of options....”

Manasi stayed quiet. He seemed to be saying all the right things and still it bothered her. She couldn’t say exactly why.

“What is really bothering you, Manasi?” Jay asked.

Manasi looked at him and saw how earnest he was about it.

“I am not sure,” She decided to be honest. “I guess basically that you didn’t talk to me. I thought we were friends!”

“So, why didn’t you talk to me about your troubles?”

Manasi looked away. ‘Because you have been pushing me away! Because you were going out of your way to maintain a distance between us!’ She felt like saying all that, but she wasn’t going to. She turned back to look at him

and shook her head. She sipped her coffee and then said, “Daddy wants to talk to you regarding this whole thing.”

Jay nodded, “Yes, I had thought so.” He put both his forearms on the table and leaned forward, “I’ll call him and setup a time.” He smiled disarmingly before saying, “Do you think I could hope for a dinner meeting? At your place?”

Manasi couldn’t stay annoyed any more and ended up laughing at his tone and expression. Just the effect he wanted, she realised from his satisfied expression. “You don’t have to call him. He is planning to call you. When he does, see if you can get him to invite you for dinner.”

Upendra made a phone call to Jay the same afternoon and the two met in person at PYC in the evening. Jay was able to convince Upendra of his sincerity and honest intentions towards NDS and Upendra was now eager to make it official. The board meeting was three days later. This was the first board meeting Upendra was going to be chairing after his stroke. The board members had always agreed with whatever Upendra had suggested and asked for. The only decisions the board had taken without Upendra were to bring in Manasi to replace Upendra and not let Niranjana be in charge. Till that point, most board meetings were mere formalities. The upcoming board meeting would not be any different.

But on receiving the details about the meeting, Abhijeet Deodhar, who had earlier left NDS but agreed to retain the stock options he had vested and stay on as a board member called Upendra and wanted to know if his stock options could be purchased back, if company had found an investor. Upendra got upset and ranted at home about how his own cousin was trying to take advantage of a difficult situation. But that was an issue he would not be able to avoid. Instead of talking to Vikram or Manasi about this, he directly called Jay. Without hesitation, Jay agreed to buy Abhijeet’s stock as well.

When Manasi found out that the total stock owned by Abhijeet and Niranjana together would mean a little over 14% of ownership of the company, she felt a shiver down her spine. She wasn’t sure about Jay buying all that stock. He was helping out, she knew. She had talked to him about it. Her father was a shrewd businessman and a good judge of character. If he had felt it was the right thing to do, she should not be worried about it. But it

worried her. Was it basically because of the distance that Jay made an effort to maintain? There didn't seem to be any valid reason to try and stop her father, but she was restless. The night before the board meeting, she was so tense that she could not sleep at all.

As expected, the board meeting was a mere formality and all the members who attended the meeting were happy to agree with Upendra. Once the agreement was reached, Upendra asked Jay to join the meeting and all the members were more than happy to make acquaintance with the much talked about NRI.

The legalities were taken care of quickly and within a week, Jay owned fourteen percent stake in NDS and became a board member. Upendra seemed quite happy with the way things had moved. It also helped that he was feeling almost normal and was eager to start working. The doctors had given a go ahead for Upendra to start working for a few hours a day. He was going to focus on the manufacturing unit and leave running of NDS to Manasi. He said he would like to come over once a month for a review and Manasi was more than willing to go along with that.

Soon, with Jay's help in interviewing for the senior role, they had identified Niranjana's replacement and he was scheduled to start working at NDS in a month. Manasi had managed to spend time going through the Indian projects, in spite of handling the complete responsibility of Niranjana's projects. Ritu was settling in and it was already obvious how valuable it was to have an experienced person with the right attitude in charge of the HR function. Chandrika was busy setting up the training department and seemed much happier in this function.

Every year NDS held its annual party at the beginning of the new financial year and this year, the party was being planned on a bigger scale; to welcome Jay as the new board member and to celebrate Upendra's improved health.

Upendra was now happy to be home when he was not working. He enjoyed Anu's company, and Manasi felt like he had fallen in love with her mother all over again; or maybe for the very first time, he was truly in love with her. He spent time with Akka and was willing to talk about even simple things like

weather or what was the menu for the day. Anu was happy being the wife she had always wanted to be. The forced confinement of so many months had given Upendra a taste of boredom like he had never imagined. He now wanted to go watch plays and movies; he wanted to go to music concerts and to different exhibitions. Anu was more than happy to accompany him to all those. For the first time in her life, Anu felt the kind of togetherness that she had always yearned for and never had. Rachana called every Sunday, and now Upendra chatted with her with as much eagerness and enthusiasm as Akka and Anu.

With all the things being just the way they should be, Manasi knew that her life should feel perfect. Yet, she was not at peace. Sometimes she woke up with a start in the night, out of a nightmare though she could never remember what the bad dreams were about. She had a feeling that something was going to go wrong in a big way...

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The days were getting longer and hotter and trees had started blossoming. Amaltas in Date's front yard was showing signs of a glorious blossom and the Mango tree in the backyard had small, raw mangoes on every branch. Every morning, when Manasi left for work, she saw a carpet of parijat flowers near the gate that made her wish for a day of leisure that she could spend in the yard, just like she and Rachana used to, long time ago. But it wasn't just a question of finding the time; it was a longing for a simpler time and for the innocence of her childhood.

On a Thursday morning, Manasi was checking her emails and was surprised to see a 'Hello Manasi' on Skype from Kavita. Manasi and Kavita had shared an apartment for two years when they started working for Microsoft as campus hires and had got along really well. For a while, the two had been really close. Their equation had started changing when Manasi and Rakesh became a couple. Manasi had always felt that Kavita didn't quite approve of Rakesh and sometimes she made some nasty comments about him. As a result, Manasi had started avoiding Kavita when she was with Rakesh.

After a few preliminaries about how they were and asking after Manasi's father, Kavita mentioned Rakesh.

Kavita: I got to know about Rakesh  
and you.

Manasi: Been almost three months now.

Manasi was glad to chat with someone other than her parents; a friend who knew both herself and Rakesh.

Manasi: And I think he is still  
angry.

Kavita: Well, to be honest, I can  
understand him being upset. I  
mean, you broke it off  
suddenly didn't you? Your  
work meant more to you than  
your relationship.

Obviously Kavita had heard from Rakesh. That was surprising. So was her response to the news. Manasi didn't like the judgemental tone Kavita seemed

to have.

Manasi: It is not that simple...

Kavita: Of course, no relationship is  
simple. But you need to make  
an effort to understand each  
other to make it work.

How had Kavita suddenly become an expert on such matters that she could advise Manasi? She typed, hoping to close the topic.

Manasi: I don't think it can be  
discussed on a chat like  
this. I still think of him as  
a friend, I hope he can move  
on and hopefully one day,  
will be able to think of me  
as a friend again.

After, what seemed like a long time waiting, in which Skype indicated that Kavita was writing a message, Manasi got two words from her.

Kavita: He has.

Manasi: What?

Manasi asked since she was not clear what Kavita meant.

Kavita: Well, Rakesh is moving on.  
Actually, he and I are seeing  
each other and I wanted to  
let you know.

Manasi: Oh OK!

Rakesh and Kavita? But Kavita had always seemed to dislike Rakesh! And why was it coming to her from Kavita? Manasi would have liked it if Rakesh had told this to her himself. She didn't want Kavita to think she held any grudges so she hurried to make that clear.

Manasi: I wish the two of you the  
best. He is a great guy!

Kavita: You are realizing that now?  
:-)

Thank you.

'Thank you' seemed like an afterthought.

Kavita: I hope you are OK. And that  
you will still think of me as



a friend.

Manasi: Yes! Absolutely!

Manasi couldn't wait to respond in the positive.

It annoyed Manasi that Rakesh didn't find it fit to tell her that he was seeing her friend. But it also made her feel a lot better and less guilty about breaking off her engagement. By that evening, she had gotten over the annoyance and felt really happy about the overall development. At the same time, her single status became more pronounced. She longed for a friend; for a lover. She wanted a partner who could be with her in mind and body. She had one particular person in mind for the role of that partner. But that person was keeping his distance!

Two days later, again when she was checking her email in the morning, she got another 'Hello Manasi' on Skype; this time from Rakesh.

Manasi smiled to herself and shook her head.

Manasi: Hi Rakesh.

Rakesh: How are you Manasi?

Manasi: I'm good. Daddy is doing well  
and things are moving well at  
NDS.

She didn't mention her chat with Kavita, wanting him to bring that up.

Rakesh: Good to hear Daddy is better.  
And I'm sorry, I didn't  
respond to your messages and  
emails for all this time. But  
I was really upset. And sad.

Manasi: Like I said, I'm sorry, I  
hurt you. But I really want  
us to be friends.

Rakesh: Good. Good.

Manasi waited for him to say the next logical thing, but when after a few minutes, in which Skype kept telling her that Rakesh was typing a message, he still had not said anything, she decided to get to the matter herself.

Manasi: I chatted with Kavita couple  
of days ago and she told me  
two of you are an item now.  
:-) I was surprised to hear  
that but really happy.

Rakesh: Yes

Rakesh said after a few moments.

Rakesh: I am glad you are OK with  
that.

Then, as per Skype, again he was typing something for a while. What was he typing now that was taking so long?

Manasi: How are things at work?

But he didn't reply and continued to type. Then she got a one word reply to her question.

Rakesh: OK

After some more moments he typed more.

Rakesh: How are things working out  
with Jay Randive? I believe  
he is back in the US. He was  
in the local news few days  
ago.

Manasi: He was visiting the US, now  
he's back here.

Why was he asking about Jay?

Rakesh: Is he again going to be  
working from your premises?

She didn't go into the details of how he had invested his personal funds into NDS and was now a board member.

Manasi: Yes, he is.

Rakesh: Manasi, you should be careful  
with him.

Manasi: Oh?

Rakesh: Yes. See, I don't know if it  
is true or not and if it is  
about NDS or some other  
company, but a few days ago,  
when he was here, I heard a  
conversation between a senior  
AccellaFab guy and a  
Microsoft guy. They were  
talking about how Jay was  
spending time in India to  
take over a company. They

were saying that he had identified the company last year but since then things had changed at the company. That Jay's plan was to get to know the organisation in question inside out so as to make the takeover easy. The AccellaFab guy said that hopefully it will not be a hostile takeover. And then the Microsoft guy replied that but if it comes to that, Jay would not hesitate. Hearing all that, I thought they meant NDS. I mean, what other company would he be getting to know inside out? I think that is the reason why he wanted to work from your premises.

Manasi stared at the screen, unsure of what she was reading. She re-read the message twice. She didn't know how to response. Jay wouldn't do that to them, would he? He was a friend! But he had been distant lately. Could it be because he was planning an acquisition? When she was engaged to Rakesh, he had seemed happy to be friends and after she broke off the engagement, he had become distant. She had wondered if it was basically because he didn't want to get involved with her and didn't want her to get closer. But could it be basically because he had made up his mind about the acquisition and so he wanted to move away from being a friend now?

And now he was holding more than fourteen percent of their stock!

She felt breathless and she found that her hands were shaking. She told herself to calm down, not panic. She should respond to Rakesh, so she did.

Manasi: Thanks for warning me. Jay  
would not do that to NDS. But  
I'm glad to know you cared.

How had she managed to come up with that coherent message when her mind was running all over the place? She needed to also close the conversation.

Manasi: OK. Bye. Let us catch up  
again some time.

Rakesh: Bye Manasi, I'll ping you  
later...

She switched off the laptop in a hurry and got up. Of course, there must be reasons why the AccellaFab person believed Jay was here for an acquisition. Maybe he had identified a company before he saw that NDS could be the right partner for AccellaFab. But he had not mentioned anything to her in all these days.

He wouldn't do that to NDS would he?

She started pacing in her room, not knowing what to think. What if he was planning to take over? How would he go about it? He had already acquired more than 14% shares now... What would be next? Would he approach other board members and offer to buy out their stock? She could think of at least two other board members who might be willing to sell their shares to him if he offered the right price.

He had also got them to setup a training function and hire a HR manager. Was it all because he wanted the company? Was he helping himself rather than NDS?

Why would he want to acquire them? When she had heard about him wanting to make products for Indian market, she had been scared that NDS would lose their Indian customers, but she had not thought that he would plan an acquisition. Once she realised that Jay was Deepu, someone she remembered very fondly, she had not even bothered worrying about losing the Indian business. Deepu wouldn't do that to NDS, surely!

As she paced back and forth, she got really scared. And very angry!

She picked up her phone to call Jay and ask him directly. He picked up after couple of rings, "Hi Manasi." How could he sound so normal as if he was a friend?

"I needed to talk to you. As soon as possible." She hoped she didn't sound agitated. "Please."

He hesitated, annoying her. "Are you busy?" She pushed him.

"Waiting for a courier. After that, I could come over to NDS."

"I'll come over to your place," Manasi said and cut the call, not giving him a chance to say anything more.

She changed in a hurry and rushed down. Anupama stopped her in her track, "Manu, I'm making coffee for Daddy, would you also like a cup?"

“No. I have to go out,” Manasi couldn’t see herself sipping coffee with her parents when her thoughts were in turmoil.

“Where are you off to? It’s Saturday! Or have you forgotten?”

Manasi made an effort to smile, “Not forgotten. But something urgent. Need to take care.”

“Are you going to the office?” Obviously, her mother had sensed her restlessness.

Manasi didn’t want to tell her that she was going to confront Jay. “Don’t wait for me for lunch,” she rushed out before Anupama or others could say anything.

There was too much traffic for a Saturday morning and Manasi found herself get more and more annoyed as she slowly made way towards Prabhat road. Bad drivers on the road made her angrier than she already was. By the time she parked near Jay’s house, she was fuming.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

She walked through the gate and climbed the three steps. Then standing there on the veranda, she forced herself to take couple of calming breaths. She looked around thinking of how exactly to start the conversation. She was still contemplating that when the door opened and Jay stood there in the door frame. He took in her appearance and said, “What’s wrong? You look upset.”

Manasi couldn’t believe how calm he was. Did he not even consider that maybe she had found out his motives? She had decided to stay calm and open the conversation by asking him about his plans going forward. But when she saw him standing there pretending to worry about her state of mind, that plan fizzled out. She was again unsure about how to tackle this. She couldn’t hide her anger; he could read that clearly.

“Are you angry? With me?” He sounded perplexed. “Why don’t you come in?” He said and moved aside to let her enter.

She marched in to stand in the living room. Jay stepped back and closed the main door slowly, before turning to look at her standing stiffly in the middle of the room with her back to him, “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“No.” Manasi said and turned to look at him. “But I would like some answers.” She was surprised she could sound so composed.

Jay raised his eyebrows, “Sure. Why don’t you sit down first?”

She sighed and sat down on the sofa. “Look Jay...”

Jay raised his hand, “I have put water on the gas stove for tea. I am making myself a cup. When you said you were coming over, I thought you would definitely want tea,” he smiled and Manasi wondered how his smile could seem so easy and genuine.

Jay vanished in the kitchen and returned in a few minutes with a tray. He put the tray on the center table, picked up his cup and said, “I filled up another cup, just in case you feel like it. And try that chiwda. Mai sent it.”

He sat down on the diwan opposite the sofa, took a sip from the cup and said, “OK. Now, tell me. What’s wrong? Why are you upset?”

“Is it true that you want to acquire NDS?” She blurted out the issue that bothered her.

“Where did you get that from?”

“Rakesh told me today.”

“Are you two getting back together?”

“What? No!” Was he trying to change the subject? “But he is still a friend.” Then she added for effect, “Who cares about me.”

Jay shook his head and asked, “Where did Rakesh get that from?”

“He heard from someone. Look, does it matter how he got to know? I would like to know if it is true!” She sounded the way she felt. Angry. Upset.

Jay got up and walked to the window. He stood there, looking out and said in a flat tone, “I am not thinking of acquiring NDS.” He put his hand on the window rail and continued, “I had considered it but I have changed my mind.”

So, he had thought about acquiring NDS! “You had considered it? When you first came for a visit, you were contemplating a takeover?”

Jay turned around slowly, “Yes, I had thought about it.”

“That is why you asked us to make all the changes! New HR manager, get rid of Niranjana.”

Jay closed his eyes and nodded in agreement.

Manasi got up angrily, “And obviously, you are still planning it! That is why you have now purchased a fourteen percent stakes in NDS! What next, Jay?”

“No!” Jay came closer and said, “I have changed my mind, I am not going to take over!”

“Why not?”

He turned his back to her before saying, “You are doing a good job running it. AccellaFab can partner with you for the Indian products.”

What was he saying? “I don’t get it. Why should that stop you from taking over? Don’t you actually want the companies you acquire to be in good shape?” She was perplexed.

He didn’t say anything and walked over to the window again. “And you say we are a well-run company, but there are so many changes we have made in the last few months, thanks to your advice and suggestions!” He continued to stand with his back to her and kept quiet. “Come on Jay! You must think I am a complete moron, if you think I am going to just accept that! I am sure when you were thinking of a takeover, it was based on some information you

had already gathered. If you really want me to believe that you really are not planning to take over, then you have to tell me what has changed in the last few months!" And he still continued to stand there with his back to her, a hand resting on the window rail.

Manasi couldn't take it anymore. She walked over to him and cried, "Come on! If you are thinking about a takeover, at least tell me that. Can't you at least be honest with me?"

He turned suddenly and his eyes looked stormy. Manasi was shaken by the look in his eyes. Why was he angry with her?

"I am not going to take over. Because of you!"

"Ha!" She was quick to respond, "You mean because we are friends?" The distance he had been keeping still rattled.

"Why is that hard to believe?"

"Because lately, you have been creating a distance between us! You are not like you used to be earlier. And then you went ahead and invested so much! I had been wondering why you are doing that," she turned around in her agitation and walked back to the centre table. Then she turned around again to face him. It was easier to say this when she was not standing so close to him that she could smell his after shave lotion. "And you are ruthless in business. Everyone knows your reputation! Everyone has heard about two of your hostile takeovers! Maybe there were more!" Once she started, she couldn't hold back, "I was warned! But like an idiot I went by instinct and trusted you!" In her agitation, she walked closer to him again, "I kept believing that you were a true friend. And all the time you were aligning for an easy acquisition!"

"Manu, listen..."

"Don't you dare call me that!" She said, not letting him continue. She looked at him once with all the anger in her heart, then she turned on her heel and walked to the door. Jay moved swiftly and was next to her when she was pulling the door open.

He pulled her hand away from the door and while pushing the door shut, turned her to face him, "Manasi, listen to me! I am not planning an acquisition!"

He had an unfathomable and intense expression on his face. Manasi looked at him and wanted to believe him. She looked into his eyes and found herself



lose into their depth. His eyes seemed to say something that he was not putting into words. “Why?” She found herself ask softly.

He dropped her hand that he was holding and moved a step back. He looked at her as if he hated her, “Because I love you!”

Manasi was taken aback by the words but more by the way he said them, explosively. As if he meant to say the opposite.

“What nonsense!” She didn’t believe him one bit. Was he giving her some story now?

She was stunned when he turned his back to her and laughed mirthlessly, “Of course! You would see it as nonsense.”

“What?” She didn’t know what he meant. She would think it was nonsense? If he really loved her...

When he didn’t say anything she slowly walked around to stand in front of him. For a brief moment before his mask fell in place, she thought she saw pain written on his face.

“What do you mean?” She almost whispered and looked at him in wonder.

He smiled without humour, “Don’t worry. I know the rules. I wouldn’t have told you if you were not so upset. Don’t let it bother you.”

“Jay, for God’s sake! What are you talking about? What rules?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I am saying,” he said walking to the Window again.

“Jay!” She couldn’t keep the anger out of her voice now. “Either you tell me what you are talking about or just tell me that I was right in the first place that you were spinning some tale about loving me!”

He turned around as she approached him. She took in his expression, “You love me? Really?” She asked in wonderment.

He sighed and ran his left hand through his hair, “Unfortunately, yes.”

Loving her was unfortunate? He was talking about some rules and then saying loving her was unfortunate. And it was causing him pain.

“Why is it unfortunate?”

“I know you will never consider me as anything more than a friend. The rules will not allow you.”

“Jay, what rules are you talking about? I have no clue! And for your kind information I love you! I am crazy about you!” She threw at him in

exasperation.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes, “What do you mean, you love me?”

“Exactly that!” She stood in front of him, with her hands on her hips, her face upturned to look properly at him.

He looked at her for a moment and she thought she saw a wayward smile starting somewhere in his eyes. But then he shook his head, “Like you loved Rakesh?” He sounded contemptuous; as if he didn’t believe her. When she didn’t respond immediately, he said, “Remember the guy you were all set to marry just about three months ago?”

Manasi sighed and slowly walked towards the sofa. She stood there lost in thought, unsure how to explain it all to Jay. But she had to make an effort, “No. Not like that.” She said it very quietly. “Nothing at all like that.”

He stood by the window, facing her, his hands in his pockets. He waited, watching her carefully. He didn’t seem to disbelieve and he didn’t seem to find what she had said worthy of ridicule; he seemed keen to hear what she had to say. Encouraged, Manasi smiled nervously before going on, “We, Rakesh and I, met each other when my parents were pushing me to get married and his family was pushing him for the same. We were compatible in every way, our background, age, education. Deciding to get married seemed the right thing to do.”

“Are you telling me that you didn’t love him?”

Manasi didn’t want to lie to him. She didn’t say anything immediately and he waited patiently. “Not exactly. I liked him a lot. At that time I also thought I was in love with him.”

“But now you don’t think that!” Was he being scornful?

“After I broke off the engagement, I felt guilty because I didn’t feel sorry about it. Or sad. Then, I acknowledged that I was in love with you. Madly. Completely. Then I also saw that I had never felt that way about Rakesh.”

She waited then, looking at him, feeling vulnerable and unsure. Waited for his response. He stood still, not even saying anything. After what seemed like forever to Manasi, Jay slowly walked over to stand in front of her. She looked at him, trying to read his eyes.

He looked at her for a moment and then sighed, “We love each other but we are not right for each other.”

“You think I am not right for you?” That hurt.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened his eyes, Manasi read the pain there, “I am not right for you.”

She didn’t understand that and her confusion showed. So he clarified, “Manu, you are a Brahman and I am a Matang.”

She stared at him then. That was what bothered him? “Are you crazy? What century do you think we are in?” She laughed out at his reasoning.

When he didn’t say anything and didn’t smile or indicate that he saw her point, she shook her head, “Jay! I don’t believe we are having this conversation!”

But he still didn’t respond. “Jay!”

He sat down on the sofa, bent forward and held his head in his hands, “I have learnt it the hard way Manu! I don’t want to go through something like that with you.”

She waited for him to say something more. When he didn’t, she asked, “Go through what?”

He didn’t look at her and talked in a flat voice, “When I was at the IIT, I had the misfortune of getting involved with a Brahman girl.” Without looking at Manasi, he explained in a toneless voice. “We were partners for Chemistry lab and became good friends. I helped her in the Engineering and Maths. She helped me with my English. By the end of third year, we knew we loved each other. We wanted to get married on completing our education.” He looked at her and answered the question in her mind that she hadn’t asked, “Her name was Sakshi Purohit, she was from UP. Varanasi to be specific. In the fourth year, her elder brother had come over and she introduced us. The brother left the next day and a day later, her father came over with her uncle and aunt. They had a long talk with her and that evening, Sakshi met me for the last time. She said that her family would not let her marry me and she couldn’t go against their wishes.”

It obviously hurt him even after all these years. “Jay...” Manasi said tentatively, unsure what she could say to make him feel better.

He looked up then, remembered pain written on his face, “She left the course and went back! Didn’t even complete her B Tech.” He smiled sadly, “Some guys in the hostel pointed out to me how unfortunate it was that she had fallen in love with me. She had to leave her B Tech halfway, because of me! I had spoilt her life, they said!”

“No. No!” Manasi sat down on her knees in front of him and grabbed his hands in hers, “She had to leave her B Tech because her family was living in the 18th century! And because she couldn’t stand up to them. They spoilt her life. Not you!”

He looked at her and after a few moments, nodded, “Hmmm”.

Encouraged Manasi smiled a little and linked her fingers through his. Looking into his eyes, she said, “You can’t let that come in our way!”

He sighed and pulled out his hands, “I have come across many open minded Brahmans. They say all the right things. They are open minded when it is about someone else. But if it is about themselves, they talk about the difficulties due to cultural differences, the lifestyles, the traditions...”

She placed her hands on his knees as she said, “I don’t know what people you are talking about. It does not matter to me. It had not occurred to me till you mentioned it.” She moved a little closer, a smile on her face, her eyes shining with love.

“But your parents will be against it.”

“Will be against what exactly? Us getting married?” She smiled a big smile, “Are you asking me to marry you, Jay?”

He looked at her steadily, “That is what I would want. I don’t want to have an affair with you if that is all it is going to be!”

Her heart stopped beating for a moment. Then it did a weird somersault, and started racing at a fast, erratic pace! She couldn’t trust her voice, so instead of saying anything, she moved in closer. But he stopped her by placing his hands on her shoulders, “Your parents will not want that!”

She shook her head, then wiped the tears that were threatening to flow and huskily said, “My parents will let me marry who ever I want to.”

“Are you sure? And what if they don’t want you to marry me?”

He was forcing her to consider these unimportant things when all she wanted to do was get really close to him! “What if your father does not want a ‘lower caste’ as a son-in-law? How do you know he will not object?”

Manasi forced herself to consider the question objectively. She tried to think about the possibility that her parents, specifically her father, might object. Her subconscious mind was most helpful in bringing relevant memories to her conscious mind. She remembered a conversation between her parents that she had heard long ago. It was probably when she was in 7th

or 8th. Her father had been telling her mother about the daughter of his cousin who had fallen in love with her classmate a non-Brahman, in the college. ‘Vilas dada made it very clear to Neetu that it will not work. He is right, you know. Neetu would be the one to suffer, if her parents didn’t put their foot down right now!’ Was it about a year later that Neetu had had an arranged marriage?

But that was long ago! Things had changed a lot since. Moreover, after his illness her father was not trying to enforce his wishes on everyone.

Manasi came out of her reverie and gave Jay a big smile. His hands were still on her shoulders. She placed her hands over his and said, “Jay, I am sure he will not object. And I am a grown woman. I make my own decisions.”

Her smile and confidence were impossible to resist. Jay smiled in response and said, “I hope you are right!”

As he got up, he pulled her up as well. They stood there looking at each other. “Manu...” Manasi didn’t wait for him to say anything more, she moved closer, touching his face gently with one hand and placing the other on his shoulder. When he just stood still, standing on her toes, she placed her lips to his. He didn’t respond right away. In fact he pulled back a fraction, “Are you sure about this?” He sounded out of breath.

“More than anything!” she whispered. He groaned and wrapped one of his arms around her, pulling her in tight. His other hand slid through her hair and he crushed her lips with his. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed back.

She was a little shy and hesitant at first in face of his obvious expertise. He tormented her with his mouth, kissing her lips, sliding his tongue on them then kissing her eyes, her ears, then back to her lips. His hands moved down her sides to her legs and back up to her breasts. When he drove his tongue into her mouth and his hands took possession of her breasts, she lost her shyness, hesitancy and control. When he lifted his mouth from hers, she moaned in protest. But then realised his intentions and joined forced with him to take her clothes off.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jay wondered if he had dreamed it all. He was almost scared to open his eyes and find out that none of it had really happened. Then he became conscious of the soft hand that was resting on his shoulder and he smiled opening his eyes. He turned his head to look at her and realised that she was asleep. He felt a little embarrassed by his lack of control which had been the reason why both of them were worn out. He rolled onto his side to look at her properly; a woman he felt he had always known. Yet she was the woman who kept surprising him all the time. She was facing him with one hand tucked under her cheek. He was tempted to pull her closer and kiss her but he managed to tame his wild thoughts and just watch her.

Her coming over was unplanned and what followed was so completely unexpected that he had not had any time to prepare for their coming together. Even though he had day dreamed about being with Manasi, about holding her in his arms, he had never ever thought he would lie with her in his bed ever!

After ushering in the New Year with her in the most unusual way, he had known that he loved her. That he would not do anything to hurt her.

There were many companies whose founders actively looked for bigger players to buy them out. It was the norm of the new industry to start a company and work really hard only to bring it to a point where it becomes an attractive asset to be acquired for bigger players. But Upendra Date came from the world of manufacturing industry and didn't think like many other founders from the IT industry. Surprisingly, Manasi didn't either. Soon after starting to spend time at NDS premises, Jay realised, that Manasi wasn't thinking of NDS takeover by someone as a possible way out for her. Moreover, she would not be willing to consider it even if someone was to offer her very good price. Even after that, for a while Jay had thought that he as the friend she turned to for guidance, could have a chance of a takeover. That was when he still thought that she wanted to marry Rakesh and go to the US. Then she proved him wrong again. By breaking off her engagement and choosing to stay back in India to run NDS. That is when he had given up any thought of taking over NDS. He had also decided not to set up AccellaFab's delivery centre in India, they would work with NDS instead.

When he had realised that there were probably some discords between her and Rakesh, he had wondered if he could do something to make her life easier with that idiot! But then, soon afterward, she had broken off her engagement and decided to stay in India and Jay had been thrilled that she was not marrying the clod.

That is when he had briefly thought about telling her how he felt and asking her to be his wife. Then a news item about a well off lower caste guy being shunned by a poor Brahman family had made him hold back. He had told himself then that no matter how well educated and how rich he was, she would not want him to be anything more than a friend. When it had seemed like she probably was looking to get closer, he had felt it was because she knew how he felt and she felt sorry for him. He had decided to go to the US thinking that if he didn't see her almost every day and if she was far away, he might realise that he wasn't really in love with her. In the US, he had even gone on couple of dates with the intention of sleeping with his dates. But that had not helped at all. Both times, after fancy dinners he had dropped off his dates at their places with the excuse of overseas calls.

He had not been able to stop thinking about Manasi. He had been debating whether to return to India at that point or not. But when he had got the wind of Will Hopper's bankruptcy, he had decided to go back right away. He could have provided the financial support to NDS from the US itself, but he wasn't sure he would get to know the exact situation unless he was right there at NDS.

Over the last year, AccellaFab had been investing in some small niche companies in India and Jay had already made up his mind about investing in NDS so when it came to buying the stock options from the two people, he had been mentally as well as financially ready. His talks with various manufacturers in India had moved ahead satisfactorily and AccellaFab would need a big team working on three different product lines in the next few days. It was difficult to hire for the skills they needed and when WH project closed down, it made complete business sense to move that team to AccellaFab. He would need to explain all this to Manasi, because she would have a lot of questions. He couldn't let her think that it was all only because he loved her and wanted to help her out in difficult times.

He took her hand in his gently and kissed her fingers softly. She smiled in her sleep making him smile to himself. She fascinated him, always had; even as an eight year old. At that time, it had been her innocence and her curiosity about everything that he had found fascinating. He had missed her company when she had gone back to her father's place, but by that time he had come out of the emotional hell he had been in when he went to Pune. She didn't know how much her company had helped him, but he would tell her about that too. If they had stayed in touch would they have continued to be friends? Would she have fallen in love with him as an adolescent? He definitely would have fallen in love with adolescent Manu.

He looked carefully at the woman of his dreams and wondered if his lovemaking had been too rough for her. After his relationship with Angela ended, he had bedded quite a few women. He had learnt a lot about sex from Angela and he had honed his skill of pleasing women in bed, with every new woman he took to bed. He knew just where to touch a woman, how to touch her, how to quickly bring her to the brink and how to extend her pleasure. But from the time Manasi put her lips to his, he had lost himself in her so completely, that he couldn't consciously think of his technique, his expertise. He couldn't think of what to do; he just had to go by instinct. Their lovemaking had been passionate and though he had told himself to go slow, try not to overwhelm her, he had ended up losing control in the end.

He noticed a lock of hair fall on her eyes and reached out to move it back. At touch of his hand on her temple, she slowly opened her eyes. Just for a moment, she seemed disoriented; then looking at him she smiled a contented smile.

"Hi," She said softly.

"Hi yourself," to his own ears he sounded awestruck. He gently stroked her cheek, "Still love me?"

She giggled at that, making him smile with happiness, "Yes. Very much." She lifted her hand to slide through his hair, "You?" She asked and then looked into his eyes. He did pull her closer then, saying, "So much!" He sounded exactly the way he felt, aroused.

When she sighed and didn't say anything, he wondered if he was overwhelming her with his physical want. With effort, he tried to think of



something else and asked her, "Are you hungry?"

She giggled again, and placing her face in the nook of his neck whispered, "Yes."

He chuckled and pulled her head back, "I meant food."

"Oh," she almost looked disappointed. But moved back a little and bending her arm, rested her head on it, "Actually, I am!" She said sounding surprised.

"Will simple home cooked food do?"

"You cooked?" She asked raising her eyebrows.

"No, you are in luck" he said getting up. He enjoyed her eyes on him as he quickly wore his briefs and jeans. "Rukhmini bai did." After he returned from the US he had told Rukhmini bai that she didn't need to be here all day, but if he was home, she usually would be here till he had his lunch. Fortunately, today, she had to go out and so she had come in early, cooked for him and left. "Come over to the dining room," he said at the bedroom door. He guessed she would want some privacy before joining him for lunch.

Ten minutes later, after he had set the table, he looked at the living room and noticed Manasi's clothes on the floor along with his shirt. He chuckled remembering the speed with which he had taken off all her clothes. So much for taking it slow! Of course, she had not objected; in fact she had been willing and eager participant in the act. Thinking that he should take the clothes to her, he walked over and collected them. He had taken two steps towards the bedroom, when Manasi walked out to the dining room, in one of his old, faded t-shirt. She smiled tentatively and said, "I hope you don't mind..."

"No, of course not," he said gently and put the clothes in his hands on the sofa. He walked over to the dining table slowly, unable to take his eyes off her. He was struggling to think about something other than the fact that she was naked under that T-shirt. She looked a little unsure standing there. With effort he collected his thoughts and pulled out a chair for her. She smiled shyly, tucked hair behind the ear and sat down. He forced himself to turn his attention to food and started serving.

They talked about food and their individual habits. What he referred to as chapati, she called a poli. He ate mutton or lamb quite often where as though

she occasionally ate non-veg, she was primarily a vegetarian.

“I can’t cook chicken or mutton,” she said looking at him with concern.

“I’ll teach you, if you like,” he said.

“And I can’t make poli. I mean chapati.”

He smiled looking at her and wondering why she looked all serious, “Neither can I.”

She put her chin up and said, as if she was spoiling for a fight, “And I am not planning to learn!”

He chuckled, “That’s OK. We’ll make sure to hire a cook.”

She looked at the food on her plate and then started eating quietly. He was curious about her mood and was watching her closely. She looked up after a few moments and said, “Men, at least Indian men, want their wives to be able to cook. Or they want them to learn.”

“Really?” He couldn’t help smiling at her belligerent look.

She took in his smile and went on, “And they want them to make good chapatis! And they want girls that would be the kind of wives their mothers would want them to marry!”

“You seem to know a lot of immature boys!” His response obviously startled her but she didn’t say anything. So he explained, “Obviously, they don’t know what they want in a wife. So they think they might as well marry a girl to please their mom! That, to me is quite immature.” She nodded slowly, as if thinking over it and agreeing with his thought. He reached out and captured her left hand, “Manu, I am not looking for any of that. I am not looking for a cook!” She seemed to like what he said but stayed quiet, so he went on, “If I wanted to marry based on the woman’s cooking skills, I could have got married long back!”

She smiled at that, “Or married the girl half your age?”

He was glad to see her mood change. He smiled a lopsided smile, “No. I don’t think I would have married anyone that much younger than me, for any reason.”

That pleased her more and she linked her fingers through his.

He looked at their linked hands lying there on the table, her dainty and fair, his big and dark; the contrast was striking. But they looked as if they belonged together. He hoped her parents will not object to their being

together. He also needed to talk to Mai. Mai would have some worries of her own, but he knew she would be thrilled that he was finally getting married.

He wanted to get married as soon as possible. Now that Manu had made him proclaim his love and state that what he really wanted was for them to get married, he couldn't wait to make that happen.

"Manu..."

"Jay..."

They spoke simultaneously and then chuckled. He lovingly squeezed her hand, smiled into her eyes and raised his eyebrows in question.

"Mai is coming back only after Viju's wedding you said. So I guess, we will have to wait till then to get married." Her tone made it clear that she was not pleased with the idea of waiting. It pleased him immensely. He also found that extremely sexy!

"I'll talk to Mai. Let's see what she says," Viju's wedding was not for a while. He would insist that Mai came over for his wedding and then went back for Viju's.

They lingered over their lunch but neither of them ate very much. After their meal was over, Manasi insisted on helping him clear the table. As she moved about the t-shirt revealed a lot more than what he could handle. By the time the food was stored in the refrigerator and the dishes were stacked up for cleaning, the only thing he could think of was taking her back to the bedroom. But he didn't want to push her. He walked over to where she was standing by the table and asked, "What do you want to do now?"

She came closer and drew a slow circle on his chest with her index finger. Then she looked up at him and smiled invitingly.

"Manu..." He pulled her closer and wrapped his arms tightly around her, dipping his head to kiss her. They both were too eager and the bedroom seemed too far, so they ended up making love on the carpet in the living room.

Afterwards, Jay lay on his back, his folded right arm under his head; he was watching the shadows on the ceiling, contemplating their life together. Manasi moved to rest her head on his shoulder, and he kissed her forehead. They needed to do a lot of things; she needed to talk to her parents, he needed to talk to Mai. They needed to make plans for what next, but for now, he just wanted to enjoy this togetherness.

Finally, they could not ignore the time anymore and so they reluctantly got up. As Manasi turned her back to him to put on her underclothes, he laughed, "This is ridiculous, you know!"

"Yeah, I agree," she said but kept her back to him. Once dressed, she walked into the bedroom and tidied her hair. She walked out to the living room but seemed reluctant to leave.

"Let me make some tea," he suggested walking to the kitchen and she walked over to stand by the refrigerator to watch him.

"Who was the the second woman you had thought of marrying?" She asked after a few moments.

He smiled, pleased that she remembered what he had said in passing, pleased by her curiosity about the women in his life. Probably because those women didn't mean anything to him anymore.

"You told me, that you had thought about marriage twice," she said as if to remind him.

"Hmmm," He said and focused on the tea. "I had thought about marrying Angela. In fact I had even proposed."

When he didn't say anything more, she prompted him, "So what happened?"

He handed her a cup and walked to the dining table with his. As they sipped their tea, he talked about meeting Angela Collins at a Microsoft party, couple of years after he started working there. About starting to date her. "It was quite a novelty for me. At IIT, Sakshi and I liked each other but we had not done anything more than kissing. But the American dating scene was a completely different ball game."

He had sex with Angela on their first date. That was his first time. Angela had realised that and even teased him. They had continued to date, she found him fascinating and he found that he could not put her and the sex they had, out of his mind. Remembering all that he decided against talking about the details. "We moved in together two months later," he looked into his tea. "I proposed to her a year later," he said looking up. Angela was different from Sakshi and not the kind of wife he had envisioned but for him, the living together had to end into a marriage. Manasi was looking at him, her tea forgotten. So he smiled and said, "Your tea is getting cold."

She looked down at her tea and picked up the cup again, "Did she reject

you?” she asked gently.

He shook his head, “No. She accepted.” He had purchased a good size diamond on Bindu’s suggestion. Angela had been thrilled and said so multiple times.

“So?” Manasi asked, watching him with her big eyes full of curiosity.

“She went over to see her parents in Louisiana two days later. She told me that she would talk to her parents about us. While she was gone I talked to Mai. Mai didn’t like the idea of me marrying a white woman but she said if it was what I wanted, she would live with it.” He smiled slightly. He had known even then, that he couldn’t marry the kind of woman Mai would like as her daughter in law. “Angela returned and started talking about setting a wedding date. She had assumed a church wedding. Moreover, she had also assumed I would convert.” His religion had not mattered to Angela when they lived together. But when it came to getting married, she said she had to marry a catholic Christian. And even without asking him, she had assumed that Jay would convert. He had been taken aback and asked her how she could just assume that. Her reply had shocked him even more, ‘Come on Jay! You want to stay a Hindu? To be called a lower caste?’ Of course, he didn’t like being called a lower caste, however rarely it happened these days. But change the religion? ‘So you don’t find me good enough as I am!’ he had said to Angela. ‘I am not the right caste for some people and I am not the right religion for you! I don’t see a difference!’

They had ended up arguing and for the first time since they moved in together, they had slept in separate rooms.

Next morning they had both assumed that the other person would have changed their mind after calming down. But Angela still wanted Jay to convert and Jay couldn’t bring himself to do that. “I didn’t want to convert. I am what I am and going through some rites called the conversion rites was not going to change me. But I wanted to be accepted for myself as I was. Being a Hindu was and is part of me.” Manasi was listening attentively, not saying anything. “Two days later, Angela moved out.” She had moved to New York six months later. He had received a wedding invitation from her when he was about to leave Microsoft and had sent her an expensive wedding present.

But being with Angela had changed him; made him confident with women. After the breakup, he had dated a lot of women. But he had avoided Indian

women, he didn't want to get involved and go beyond dating. With his cultural baggage, he had felt Indian women would definitely want more and that he could not date them and leave them. He was fine doing that with American women, justifying his actions with the convenient thought that 'American culture is different'. He had not thought about all this much but now he saw that in a way, he had been raciest.

After Angela, he had not thought about getting married again. Till now. And now he just could not wait!

Coming out of his reverie, he became aware of the noise outside and got up. As he went to open the back door, Manasi joked, "You want me to leave from the back door?"

He turned to look at her quickly and laughed at her joke, "No. I am opening the door for the damn cat!"

"Cat?" She was out of the chair and over by the door in a flash. "You have a cat?"

"It's a cat Mai started feeding while she was here. Rukhimi bai kept feeding her in my absence. Now the damn thing won't go away! And she's had kittens recently!" He was annoyed with Mai for having started feeding the animal but he could not bring himself to just ignore her pitiful meows or the fact that there were kittens.

As soon as he opened the door a calico cat walked in as if she owned the place. She rubbed herself against his legs and walked towards the kitchen.

"What is her name?" Manasi asked following the cat.

"It is just a stray! No name," Jay said opening the fridge.

"Do you feed her every day?" Manasi was crouching down and petting the cat.

"Yes," Jay put milk over the small pieces of roti in the bowl.

"And you have not given her a name? She is gorgeous!" Jay noticed that the cat was enjoying being petted.

He put down the bowl and the cat walked over. She smelled it and seemed to contemplate whether she should eat or reject it, but then decided to do him a favour and started eating.

"How old are her kittens? How many are there? And where are they?" Had Manasi forgotten that she had to leave? Jay didn't understand this fascination

with cats.

“Didn’t you say that you had to get home at least by tea time?” He reminded her. She looked at the time and then turned back to look at the cat.

“Yeah. I’ll have to go. But tell me about the kittens first!”

He couldn’t help smiling at her, “There are three, if I am not wrong. I guess about three weeks old. They are in that shed in the backyard.”

Manasi got up and came over to where he was standing. “We’ll have to think of a good name for the cat!” she told him.

He couldn’t help but wrap his arms around her and she stood on her toes to give him a quick kiss. Then she sighed, “I’ll talk to my parents. And I’ll call you tomorrow. I think they will want to invite you over to talk about when, how etc. about the wedding.”

He put his arm around her shoulder as they walked out towards the living room, “Whichever way, I don’t care. At the earliest!”

“Yeah!” she said with a big smile.

“I’ll talk to Mai right away,” he told her as he walked her to her car.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Life had taken another unexpected turn. But this particular turn was wonderful! Life had suddenly become glorious.

Happiness that bubbled inside Manasi was in complete contrast to the fear that had driven her in the morning when she had rushed to confront Jay. She had been scared and unsure on her way over. Now she felt that she had never been this happy ever! She couldn't stop smiling as she drove home.

The traffic didn't bother her, nor the bad drivers. She looked at the trees and they seemed happy too. The leaves seemed to be enjoying the breeze and she could almost hear the birds sing.

She reached home and as she opened the gate to drive the car in, seated on the porch, Akka saw her. As Maansi got back into the driver's seat, she heard Akka call out to Anu. By the time Manasi parked the car and came around to the porch, her mother was standing in the door frame. They both looked at Manasi curiously but noticing her smile, they relaxed.

"Where did you rush off to in the morning Manu?" Akka asked when Manasi went to sit next to her. "Your mother tried calling you a few times, but you didn't take any of her calls!"

She had put her phone in the backpack and she had walked in to confront Jay, leaving the backpack in the car.

"I have made tea. Do you want some?" her mother asked realizing that nothing seemed wrong with Manasi, in fact she looked to be in a good mood.

"Ummm...", Manasi was not interested in tea but she wanted to talk to all of them. "OK. But I have something to tell you. Where is daddy?"

"Daddy had gone for a meeting. He has just come back." Her mother was watching her curiously. "What did you want to talk about? Is it about work?"

"I'll tell you after I freshen up," Manasi got up to go in. Her mother followed her and Akka walked in slowly after them.

When she came down, she found all the three at the dining table.

"There she is," her mother said and then poured her a cup of tea.

Manasi sat down, took a sip and said, "So this morning, I rushed out to talk to Jay for something related to NDS." She had decided it was best to leave



out the details. Why talk about the takeover threat she had felt, now? Her audience of three were all ears. “Well, anyway, we talked about NDS and then some other things.” She sipped her tea, more because she needed to pause before she told them more.

“Anyway, so the thing is, he proposed to me!” She couldn’t stop smiling a big smile.

“Marriage?” Akka asked.

Manasi laughed at that, “Yes.”

She looked at her mother who looked undecided and then at her father who had a watchful expression. “And?” He asked looking very serious.

She laughed a little before saying, “I said yes.”

“Without talking to us?” The way he said it, reminded Manasi of her childhood and how her father was in those days; strict disciplinary who wanted everything done only his way. But she was no longer the girl who used to be scared of him and always worried about displeasing him; the girl who wanted to please him at any cost.

She met his eyes as she said, “Daddy, he loves me and I love him.”

Her father shook his head, “I don’t want you to marry him.”

‘Too bad!’ Manasi felt like saying but she should try to reason with him. She didn’t want to end up hurting him as well as her mother and grandmother. “Daddy, he is a good man. He cares about all the things we care about. You care about! He has come back to India to be with his mother! We want to live here in India.” She smiled at him and then laughed a little ending with, “And you know that he is well off!”

But her father didn’t change his position, “I know all that. But he is not a Brahman. In fact, he belongs to one of the lowest castes!” the anger in his voice was very clear.

Manasi shook her head, “It doesn’t matter to me. At all!”

“Manu, things are not like old days and I agree that the change is good. But different castes have different customs. What is his caste? And if you were to marry him, how will his family treat you? Most of these people don’t treat their women well!” Akka said softly.

Manasi sighed but instead of getting into a discussion about how Akka was wrong and her information was probably dated, she just said, “Akka, no one

is going to treat me badly. Jay and I would be living here in Pune. The only other person that matters is his mother, Mai. And she is a very nice person.”

“No!”, her father shouted standing up and walked off.

The three women looked after him stunned and then slowly, Anu got up. Manasi saw worry written on her mother’s face as she said, “Manu, we shouldn’t be upsetting him.” Then she went looking for her husband.

Manasi had expected mildly negative reactions, if at all. Not this. She turned to Akka, “Akka...” she didn’t know what to say.

Akka shook her head, then slowly got up and came over to Manasi’s chair. She put her hand on Manasi’s shoulder “You know, it is not easy to break these boundaries. They say that the caste is the one that can’t be cast away...”

Manasi turned and looked at Akka, standing next to her, “Not for me. Not for Jay.”

“Manu...” Akka started and then stopped, not saying anything more of what she had thought. She patted Manasi gently and said, “Let us leave the topic for now.” Then she walked towards her room.

Manasi went to her room and shut the door. She paced the room for a few minutes and then switched on her laptop, thinking she could at least do some work. She couldn’t focus and kept thinking if there was anything that she could do to get her father to see things differently. She stayed there till it was time for dinner. Forcing herself to be cheerful, she went down to dinner to find that her father had had an early dinner and was in his room. Akka too had eaten and retired to her room.

Anu was there though. The two of them sat at the table and had a quiet dinner. Neither of them ate much. Both of them made an effort to seem as normal as possible. After dinner, on Anu’s request, Manasi accompanied her to the porch. They sat on the swing and after a while, Anu looked at Manasi in all seriousness, “Manu, you were engaged to Rakesh till just three months ago and seemed quite happy about the idea of marrying him. Maybe if you don’t marry Jay, you will meet someone else, someone Daddy will approve of and you will be happy to marry.”

Manasi shook her head, turned and looked at her mother, “What I feel for Jay is very different from what I felt for Rakesh. If I had met Jay earlier, I wouldn’t have gotten engaged to Rakesh at all.” She looked towards the sky

and sighed, “I love him Mamma. And I really don’t like to have to discuss whether I should marry him or not only because you people don’t like his caste!”

“It is not a question of us liking or not liking it. We only want what is best for you. Manu...”

Manasi didn’t let her finish, “Why are you saying that when you know that is not true, Mamma?”

They both got quiet and after a while, Manasi got to go in. Anu caught her hand to stop her. When Manasi turned to look at her, she said, “Daddy will be very hurt and he will be very angry with you. I don’t know how he will handle it or what he will do.” Then she smiled sadly, “But if you are absolutely sure about marrying Jay, I want you to know that I will try my best to convince Daddy.”

Manasi had tears in her eyes when she sat back on the swing and hugged her mother.

Next morning, Manasi came down from her room and stopped in her tracks approaching the dining table. Neither her mother, nor her grandmother were in sight and her father was seated at the head of the table. She made a deliberate effort to calm down and smile. As she poured a cup of tea for herself, she said as casually as she could, “Good morning daddy.”

Her father didn’t bother to lower the Sunday paper he was holding in front of him and just grunted, “Hmmm, morning.”

Manasi sat down slowly and started sipping her tea. She waited to see if her father would say anything, and then pulled out one of the Sunday supplements from the table. She continued to sip her tea and try to concentrate on what she was trying to read, but all her attention was on her father. After about ten minutes, he folded the paper and put it carefully on the table. When he said, “Manu,” Manasi kept her paper down and paid full attention. “Your mother thinks I should talk to you about this thing you have got in your head about marrying that guy!”

Manasi didn’t like his tone and she didn’t like the way he referred to Jay as ‘that guy’. But she didn’t want to object to these things if her father was coming around. She smiled tentatively, “Daddy, if you are worried about me, I can tell you that you don’t need to. Jay is a good man.”

“You keep saying that,” he said sternly. “I had not realised his plan! So I accepted his financial help. I called him over to play chess because I thought he was a good man and thought of me as a friend. But not anymore! I think his aim always was to make you his wife! He provided the financial backing so that when he asked you to marry him, you won’t be able to say no.”

She shook her head slowly, “He wasn’t planning to ask me! And I am not marrying him because he has provided us the financial backing!”

But her father was not listening to her, “We can go to banks and get a loan. We can buy back the stock he holds. You don’t have to pay this high a price. You don’t have to sacrifice yourself like this.”

“Daddy! I am not sacrificing myself. I want to marry him!”

“You can’t marry him! I will not allow that!” His raised voice brought her mother out of the kitchen.

Manasi looked at him getting angry, and turned to look at her mother. Anu walked slowly towards him and said, “Upendra, you agreed not to get angry.” He looked at Anu in annoyance but did make a visible effort to calm down, “Yes. OK.”

“Daddy, Jay and I plan to get married. It is not as if I am running away or committing a crime,” Manasi made an effort to say it as softly as possible.

Her father pushed the chair back and said, “I am not giving you the permission to marry him!”

Manasi lost her patience. She folded her arms, and for a moment thought if she shouldn’t, but then she said very firmly, “I am not asking for permission.”

Her father looked at her furiously, his left hand crumpling a newspaper supplement. His nostrils flared worrying Manasi as well as her mother. Anu moved closer to him and placed her hand gently on his shoulder. He looked up at his wife and made a visible effort to calm down. Even though she was frustrated and angry with the way her father was responding, Manasi was quite fascinated by the way her parents equation with each other had changed. She marvelled at her mother for being so confident and her father for listening to her.

Upendra turned to her and sighed, “Manasi, I know, you are a grown woman. And you don’t need my permission. But remember that you live in ‘my’ house.” Manasi noticed how he put extra stress on ‘my’. His arrogance

was all intact! And what did he mean? She didn't know how to respond to that right away. Before she could say anything, he continued, "And even if I agreed that you are doing a better job than me, you are running 'my' company!"

"What?" Manasi got up shocked. "Why are you bringing NDS into this?"

He laughed without humour, "That is something you should ask Jay. He is the one who went after NDS to get you." He relaxed his hold on the new paper supplement and straitened it with his other hand. Then he looked up and said, "And if I can help it, I will not let him get either!"

Manasi felt close to tears. Tears of anger and frustration. She stood tall and took a deep breath, "What do you mean Daddy? Please tell me exactly!"

"Let me make it clear to you. You can either choose us, me, your mother, Akka, this house. And NDS. Or that guy. You make the choice."

Manasi stood there shocked and angry! But it was her mother who exclaimed, "Upendra! What are you saying?"

Upendra looked at his wife once again and replied, "I agreed not to get angry Anu. I didn't agree to let her marry him. I will not have that! She will not marry that guy living in my house!" He glared at Manasi and after a short pause told her, "This discussion is over! I am not going to talk about this again and I don't want to hear it being discussed in the house!"

Manasi looked at her father through the tears that were threatening to flow, turned on her heel and ran towards the stairs. She climbed the stairs two at a time and once inside her room, she banged the door before locking it.

In her room, she threw herself on the bed and let the tears that she had made every effort to hold back flow freely. After a few minutes, she sat up, still unsure of what to do next. Love of her parents, her grandmother, the work she loved stacked against the love of a man who had been a great friend all along and now a lover too.

How could her father do that to her? She was hurt and very angry with him. And still, she didn't really want to have to cut her ties with him. Thinking about leaving NDS agitated her and the thought of walking away from her mother and grandmother brought fresh flood of tears. She got up and started pacing the room, thinking of some way of trying to convince him.

She tried to think up different points to bring up to her father but after a

few minutes of this she stopped pacing and acknowledged that her father would not listen to any of those and he would not change his mind.

Choose Akka, her parents, her home and NDS over Jay? But why should she have to choose at all? It wasn't about her choice. She would choose to have both. But it was about a man trying to force his will on her and willing to play unfair for that versus a man who had gone out of his way to help her company and changed his plans because of his love for her. She had hoped to have it all, but her father would not let her!

She came down the stairs an hour and half after she had run up to her room. Her parents as well as her grandmother were in the living room. Manasi put down the suitcase near the stairs and walked towards her father. She handed him the paper she was holding in her hand and said, "This is my resignation in print. I have also sent you an email. Should I send it to anyone else as well?"

"Manu! What are you doing? And what is that suitcase for?" Her mother sounded scared.

Manasi slowly turned to look at her mother and walked over. She hugged her mother and put her head on her shoulder. Akka too got up slowly and said with tearful eyes, "Manu! Are you leaving home?"

"He has played his cards well! She has become his pawn now!" Her father bellowed. He addressed his next words to Manasi, "So, you choose him over me! Over your mother and grandmother!"

Manasi lifted her head from her mother's shoulder, stood tall and then turned to look at her father. She wanted to look him in the eye when she said this, "I shouldn't have to choose Daddy! You are making me choose! I am having to leave NDS, leave home, because of you." She waited couple of moments to see if he would stop her. But he looked away and she lost that hope. She then walked over to her grandmother, and bent down to touch her feet, "I need your blessing, Akka" she said huskily.

Akka, pulled her up and hugged her tight. Then she wiped her eyes and said, "God Bless!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

She drove slowly, unable to believe that she had actually left home. As expected, there was not much traffic and she reached Jay's place in fifteen minutes. When she got out of the car, it was quite hot but she felt as if she was shivering. She hurried inside the gate and ran up the three steps to ring the bell.

Jay took time opening the door. He might have been in the bathroom, for he looked freshly shaved and showered. He looked at her in surprise and then smiled slowly, "It definitely is a good morning!" Then he realised that she didn't look very happy. His expression changed to a blank and he stood aside saying, "Come in."

She walked inside and stood by the sofa like she had the previous day. Then she turned and said, "You were right about my father. He is completely against us getting married."

Jay was by the front door trying to read her expressions. He looked at her searchingly and then asked, "And?"

"Well, I tried talking to him, but he just is in no mood to listen!"

Jay walked to her slowly, "What do you want to do?"

"He asked me to choose between family, NDS and home, both of which he pointed out were his, on one hand and you," she felt tears well up in her eyes again.

Jay stood in front of her and took her face in his hands. He looked into her eyes and sombrely said, "I will not hold it against you."

She realised that he thought she was here only to tell him that she was going back on her word. She lost the battle against the tears that she had been trying to hold back. They flowed freely as she looked into his eyes and moved closer. He gently wrapped his arms around her as she rested her head against his shoulder and said, "My suitcase is in the car. I have left home."

Jay drew in a sharp breath and moved her away from him. He looked very serious when he held her arms tightly and asked, "What? Are you sure about this?"

In spite of the gravity of the situation, she found herself chuckle just a bit as she repeated her words from previous day, "More than anything else!"

He kept looking at her for a few minutes, without saying anything. But

Manasi didn't mind, she could read the wonder and admiration in his eyes.

Jay then got all businesslike. He told her that she couldn't possibly stay with him without getting married. "I don't want people to talk."

She tried to tell him that it wouldn't matter since they were anyway going to get married. And that, she didn't care about what people said. But he was adamant. "If we want to make an effort to bring your father around, then it would be best if we were not living together before getting married." Then he moved to the kitchen to make tea and Manasi followed. As he went about making tea, he told her about talking to Mai the previous day. She had some worries but she would come down as soon as possible. His uncle had agreed to bring Mai over in couple of days.

While they sat at the table and sipped their tea, Manasi found herself thinking about the previous day. About making love. And then going home. And how things had taken a sudden turn. She was lost in her thoughts and was startled when suddenly Jay put down his cup, "I know! Let us go over to Joshi Kaka."

Joshi ajoba heard them out and then said, "Manasi can stay here till you get married." He then smiled assuringly. Umesh came in carrying tea for them all and Kaka turned to Umesh and said, "Umesh, make sure the guest room is in order."

It was ajoba who spoke the most while having tea. He seemed to have found something interesting to do. "When do you plan to get married? Are you thinking of a court marriage or do you want to go in for all the rituals?" Jay and Manasi had not thought about a date and they had not discussed how they should go about it. Manasi didn't really care about the way they tied the knot. She wasn't sure about Jay's preference, but her guess was that he wouldn't want the rituals. Maybe it should be a court marriage. She looked at Jay and he raised eyebrows in question. But before either of them could say anything, Joshi ajoba continued, "For court marriage, you need to wait a month from the time you apply for the license. If you want to marry right away, that option is ruled out."

After Joshi kaka talked to a friend of his, who was a registered Purohit with Jnana Prabodhini and Jay talked to Mai, it was decided that they would get married a week later, at Jay's rented Bungalow. Manasi longed to call her mother but didn't want to do it with Joshi kaka and Jay watching her.



She moved into the guest room and after lunch sent a message to her mother and called Rachana. Rachana received the news with expected amount of surprise and expressed her anger over their father's stand. "I am coming down! I am not going to miss your wedding, no matter how small scale and how simple it is going to be!" Manasi felt much better to have some support albeit only from her younger sister.

That night, after dinner when Manasi was in the guest room, feeling out of place, she got a call from her mother. From the lateness of the hour, Manasi guessed that her mother had waited for her father to go to sleep. "Manu, what is all the hurry? Why don't you wait till Daddy comes around?"

"Mamma, do you think he is going to come around? How much time would that take? Or would he actually see this as an opportunity to force me to change my mind?"

Her mother kept quiet. Manasi knew that she was right. So did her mother.

"I am glad you are staying at Joshi kaka's place," her mother said after a pause.

"Jay made me do it," Manasi was still rather peeved with having to do that.

Her mother laughed a little, "I can see he has more sense than you." Her mother then told her that Rachana had booked her ticket. She also talked about all the shopping Manasi needed to do and all the rituals that a girl was supposed to carry out before the marriage ceremony. Manasi listened, but was sure she was not going to do most of those things. She was surprised when her mother said, "I want to buy jewellery for you. I'll talk to daddy in next couple of days and then take you to the jeweller." Manasi mentioned that her father would not like that but her mother firmly said, "This is my gold. I will do what I wish with it."

Manasi grew restless and uneasy as the days passed. She was not going to NDS, but people called her. Asking her what time would suit her for meetings, giving her project updates and asking her advice. She didn't tell them about her resignation, not even to Vikram. She said she could talk on phone but not go in. She didn't go in any details and kept her reasons vague. This couldn't go on for long of course.

Jay didn't go to NDS either; he worked from home. When Mayank asked to meet him, Jay met him at a coffee shop near NDS.

On Tuesday, Jay and Manasi took care of some shopping; then chatted easily over cups of tea. Jay told Manasi that he had informed Danny and Bindu about his impending wedding and that both of them had been really surprised.

“Will they come over?” Manasi asked and was rather disappointed when Jay said they couldn’t at such a short notice.

Till Wednesday, Manasi spent a good part of the day at Jay’s bungalow. When she got there, Rukhmini Bai would be around. She would cook and take care of some other housekeeping tasks till lunch. She would serve lunch to Jay and Manasi, and then leave. Post lunch, while Jay worked, Manasi pottered around the house, spent some time on her new laptop that Jay and she had bought on Monday, and got to know the cat. She went to the shed and found three kittens playing there. She named the mother cat Elsa and told Jay that they needed to think of good names for the two female and one male kitten. Jay looked up from his laptop and asked, “Why Elsa?”

“From Born Free,” Manasi explained.

“From What?”

“You know, the movie!” She exclaimed. Then looking at his blank expression she asked, “You have not seen the movie or read the book?”

“No. Is it about cats?”

“No! It is about this lioness...” Manasi went on to give him the gist of the movie. He listened attentively and then pulled her onto his lap. It was a long time after that when Jay got back to work.

Things got busy after that and Jay and Manasi didn’t have any time for themselves.

On Thursday, Manasi was woken up very early by the ringing of her phone. She looked at the unknown number, her mind racing. Who was calling at this hour? What had happened? She picked up the phone with her heart in her mouth. “Hello?”

It was Rachana, who had landed in Mumbai earlier and now had almost reached Pune. When Manasi grumbled about the odd hours, Rachana told her firmly, “Manu Di, I have left everything I was doing, spent my savings to buy a ticket at the last minute to attend your wedding! And you are complaining

because I woke you up early?! Really!!” Manasi had an urge to hug her sister! It felt so good to have her sister being her own sassy self.

“What number is this?” Manasi asked her.

“It is the new local number! Mamma sent a phone with the car to the airport,” Rachana informed her.

She didn’t have to wait too long to hug her sister. When Anu and Rachana arrived after breakfast to take Manasi for jewellery shopping, Along with Manasi, Joshi ajoba was eagerly waiting.

He made Anu sit by him, “It has been a long time Anu,” he said misty eyed. Manasi noticed how her mother’s eyes teared up and felt a fresh rush of anger for her father for having kept her mother away from Joshis for all this while.

“Manasi is beautiful like you and strong-willed like her father,” Joshi ajoba was saying. “It is good to see her know exactly what she wants and taking a stand.”

Anu turned to look at Manasi, “Yes,” she said with a slight smile.

The three women shopped for jewellery as well as clothes and then had a late lunch at a simple restaurant.

“Is Daddy OK?” Manasi couldn’t help ask.

“He is sulking!” Rachana declared. “He is angry with you and your Jay. He is now angry with me as well,” she said nonchalantly, putting a whole gulab jamun in her mouth. “He looks at my coming over for the wedding as siding with you and against him.” She savoured the Gulab Jamun, closing her eyes, “This is so good!” she said pointing to her mouth. Then continued talking about her conversation with her father, “But he is not giving me any ultimatum. For one, it is not me marrying ‘a lower caste’. Secondly, if it didn’t make you, his obedient daughter bend to his wishes, he knows it will not make any difference to me.” She paused to have more Gulab Jamun and then said, “Surprisingly, he is not mad at Mamma! I was quite surprised by the progress he has made health wise and how well behaved he is with Mamma.”

Manasi was glad that at least her mother will not have to bear the brunt of her decision and actions. She turned to her mother with a tentative smile, “Does he know you are buying me jewellery?”

Anu nodded, “Yes. And I have also told him that I will be attending the

wedding!”

“What about Akka?”

But her mother didn’t have an answer for that question.

After lunch, all three went over to Jay’s place. Manasi was anxious about the meeting, needlessly, as she realised quickly. Jay made tea for the three of them and chatted easily. He teased Rachana about how he remembered her as a cranky child of four. “I wasn’t cranky!” she said laughing self-consciously. Then she turned the tables by saying, “But I guess, even then you really had eyes only for Manu Di!”

Anu asked when Mai was arriving and hearing that she would be arriving that evening said, “I will call tomorrow morning and two of us can discuss about the menu for the day of the wedding.” Jay and Manasi looked at each other in surprise. Neither of them had given any thought to food.

As the two women got up to leave, Jay moved forward and bent down to touch Anu’s feet. Rachana and Manasi looked at him in surprise, but Anu blessed him, “Live long; be happy.” As he got up she smiled at him, “My daughter is lucky to find a life partner like you.” Then, after a slight pause, she sighed, “I wish her father would be able to understand that!”

Mai and her brother arrived that evening. To Manasi, she looked better than when she had last seen her. Right after their arrival, Mai sat Manasi down and asked, “Are you sure about going through with this wedding?” Manasi nodded with a smile. Mai was not satisfied with that, “Look, I know you are a kind hearted girl. But marriage is a lifetime commitment. Your father’s objection is not really unreasonable. There are a lot of differences in the way you and Jay are brought up, your backgrounds.”

Manasi smiled gently, “It does not matter, Mai.”

But Mai was not done yet, “Jay has become rich and travelled the world, but his roots are still in the village. If he decides to go and live in a village tomorrow, will you be OK with that?”

Why would Jay think of moving to the village? His work was in the IT and manufacturing industry. But this was not the time to talk about that. She held Mai’s hands in hers and said reassuringly, “Mai, don’t worry. It would not matter where we live as long as we are together.”

Manasi had made tea for all, taking efforts to make it really strong, the way Jay had shown her. His uncle, clad in white pajama & kurta, a Gandhi cap on his head, looked carefully at Manasi. He sat on the dining chair cross legged and when Manasi put a cup in front of him, asked for a saucer. Jay told him that his cups didn't have saucers but then gave him a stainless steel plate that he could use as a saucer. Babanrao, Jay's uncle then proceeded to talk about Manasi, though he didn't address her. He wanted to know if she could wear a sari. Jay smiled at Manasi before looking at his uncle, "I don't really know Mama. I have never seen her in one. But she can tell you."

Manasi looked at how casually Jay was taking it and relaxed, "I have worn sari few times. But I am not comfortable in it."

Babanrao shook his head disapprovingly and asked if she could cook well. "No, not really." Jay replied and laughed. "But I can. So we won't starve." His uncle didn't quite like the joke. And he moved onto the next topic. Jay tolerated this for a few minutes and then put an end to it, "That is enough, Mama. I don't need Manasi to do any of these things and I don't even want her to." His uncle then grumbled how a high caste wife could be a nuisance but again Jay stopped him.

Manasi almost wished her father could have heard all the objections Jay's uncle had to their alliance. He should see the other side of the coin. She said as much to Jay when he walked her to Joshi's place after dinner. Jay gave her half a smile as if he was thinking about something else. Then asked if she had her passport with her.

"Yes," she replied tentatively. And asked, "Why?" when he didn't say anything.

He stopped walking and turned to look at her, "I would like to take you for a honeymoon."

Manasi had not expected that at all. She was pleasantly surprised once again. Like she had been when Jay had insisted on putting a diamond ring on her finger two days earlier. She smiled slowly, "OK." He only nodded. "OK" she said again, her eyes sparkling. Jay smiled with satisfaction and they started walking again. Manasi tucked her hand in his and asked playfully, "So where do you plan to take me Mr. Randive?"

He said that he had not decided; something they would have to think and plan.

Mai had wanted Manasi to not go over to Jay's place till the wedding, "Bridegroom and bride are not supposed to meet like this." But Jay shot that down and so Manasi was at the bungalow when her mother called to talk to Mai. The call made Mai very happy and the two women planned an elaborate lunch for Sunday. That evening Mai made Jay take her and Manasi to a jeweller so that a mangalsutra can be bought for Manasi.

Rachana came over to Joshi's place on Saturday morning and dragged Manasi to a beauty parlour insisting that Manasi should get Mehendi done on her hands and a facial too! The two girls spent few hours at the parlour and then went over to Jay's place. Jay and Rachana teased each other and then ganged up against Manasi about something silly. Manasi was very happy to see her sister and her would be husband get along so well.

In spite of the circumstances in which the wedding was hastily arranged and in spite of her father's continued angry silence, people around her were going out of their way to make her wedding special!

After Rachana left, Mai went to lie down for some time and Babanrao went out for a walk. Jay and Manasi were sitting at the dining table with cups of tea in front of them, when the unthinkable happened. Jay's phone rang breaking their conversation. He looked at the screen of his phone and showed it to Manasi before connecting the call. It said, Upendra Date!

He said Hello and then put the phone on the speaker.

"I am calling you because my daughter is so angry with me that she is not picking up the phone." Her father said sounding angry himself. Manasi put her hand to her forehead and got up to fetch her small purse. She pulled out the phone from that and mouthed, 'on silent' to Jay.

"She is not angry, Sir. Her phone was on silent, I think" Jay said sounding calm and collected. Manasi looked at him with admiration and smiled. "I am glad you called on my number." He sat up and said, "Sir, would you like to talk to her? Or both of us?" Manasi couldn't believe how cool he sounded saying that! Just like that he was asking her father to talk to them together!

There was total silence from the other side and then her father said, "I would like to talk to her first and then to both of you."

Manasi looked at the phone on the table, her mouth falling open in surprise.

Then Jay signalled her to pick it up and she did. Switching off the speaker, she put it to her ear and said, "Hello Daddy."

He took his time, making her wait. "Your mother tells me you are getting married tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Your mother is of the opinion that your stubbornness comes from me." Did he sound almost proud while saying that?

Manasi didn't know what to say. She wondered if she should point out that she wasn't really stubborn, she had bent to various people's wishes a lot many times. That she had been this firm and not willing to step back only on this issue. She loved Jay and her father's demand had been unfair. Two things that drove her to take her firm stand. But she kept quiet, not saying anything in response.

"And you don't want your father there, is that it?"

"Daddy, that's not fair!" She said with emphasis and putting the phone on speaker, she kept it on the table. She wanted Jay to hear the conversation. She sat down quickly and then hurried to say, "We would love you to be there!"

"Well, you didn't even bother to call me."

Had he been expecting her to call him and talk to him? Tell him that she was getting married? Persuade him? She hadn't done any of that assuming that there was no way he would come around. "Daddy, I am really sorry! You were so angry, I thought you wouldn't even want to talk to me!" Her eyes were tearing up. Jay took one of her hand in his and caressed gently. "Please do come. It would mean a lot to me," she said, her tears flowing freely now.

"Hmmm. You are inviting me as a guest or can I be the one performing Kanyaadaan?" Her father wanted to know.

Manasi found herself smiling a little, "We will not have kanyaadaan."

"It is part of a traditional wedding."

"We will do the rituals that are must for a vedic ceremony. Kanyaadaan is not one of them." Then she went ahead and repeated what she had told Jay and Joshi ajoba earlier, "I am not anyone's property that will be donated to Jay. Not even yours!"

Her father cleared his throat, and after a pause said, "OK."

What did that mean? He was OK with it now? And will attend the

wedding?

“If I am not against you marrying that guy now, is there a need for a hasty wedding? Can’t we postpone it, plan it out well and do it in style?”

She looked up at Jay. She saw the concern in his eyes just for a moment before he put on his mask of a neutral expression. “No Daddy, we are not going to postpone.”

“Alright!” He didn’t argue about that. “I will be there tomorrow.”

“Thank you!” She meant it in all sincerity.

“I am still not happy that you chose him over me!” Did he have to spoil it?

Manasi wondered if she should let it go. Then she decided to make her point, “I am not happy daddy, that you made me choose!”

“Yes, you told me when you walked off!” Then not giving her a chance to reply to that he said, “Put me on speaker now.”

Manasi picked up the phone and put it down making some noise. “Hello Sir,” Jay said at the right moment.

“My daughter is marrying you so I have no choice but to accept you as my son-in-law. But I’ll be watching you! One wrong step and I will come after you. I will not hesitate to take legal action against you, keep in mind!”

Jay smiled a pleasant smile looking at Manasi, “Sir, I will not do anything to hurt Manasi in anyway. I give you my word.”

Manasi was happy beyond words but couldn’t figure out how her father had actually come around and that too, in such a short time!

It was after the wedding that Manasi found out from Rachana about a long conversation her mother had had with her father. “She gave him a lecture, Manu Di! She told him that she could have understood his stand if it was someone completely unsuitable for you. She said she liked Jay and that she thought you were really lucky to be marrying him.” Manasi could imagine how angry her father would have been on hearing that. And she said as much. But Rachana said, “It was really funny, but he didn’t shout or yell at Mamma. He grumbled something and Mamma told him she could not believe he didn’t see how Jay was so similar to him. Both were brought up by single mothers. Both had struggled a lot and both had achieved a lot at a young age. And both were IIT Powai alumni! Somehow I think that did have an impact.”

“How did you hear all this? I can’t imagine Mamma talking to Daddy like



that in front of you or any of us!” Manasi couldn’t help asking.

“The things I am doing for you Manu Di!” Rachana said dramatically and then explained, “ This was at night and in their room. The door was closed and I couldn’t hear clearly. So I went out into the garden quietly and stood by the wall next to the window.” She then smiled at Manasi’s expression and said, “Don’t you dare scold me about this now! I did it only so that I could relay this to you!”

Manasi didn’t quite know how to react to that, but then after a few moments of silence, she gave in and sheepishly asked, “Was there anything more?”

Rachana hugged her and laughed aloud before telling her more, “Mamma then told him that she would like him to be there for the wedding on Sunday. That since you were anyway going to marry Jay, Daddy was the only one who was going to lose a lot. He had hurt and distanced his daughter and in the same process he had also lost his best executive! That if he really wanted happiness for Akka, for Mamma, you and me then he really had to start looking at things from other people’s perspective.”

“Then?” Manasi prompted her.

“Well, then he asked her if she was done with lecturing him and if he could go to sleep!”, Rachana said and laughed. “This happened on Thursday night and he didn’t say anything all of Friday. Neither did Mamma. Of course they didn’t know that I knew about the lecture session!

“But then when I went home after our visit to the parlour, he was was complaining to Mamma that you were not picking up his calls.”

The conversation between her parents relayed to her by Rachana, again made Manasi aware that the equation in her parents relationship had changed completely after his illness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It was a simple ceremony, attended by few people. Manasi wore a yellow saree and gold jewellery. With little makeup, a bright red bindi on her forehead, green glass bangles and Mehendi on her hands, she was a breathtakingly beautiful bride. Jay could not keep his eyes off her. She loved the looks he kept giving her, and found herself blush. He himself looked really good in the Sherwani and Manasi realised that he seemed at ease in the Indian clothes like he was in his jeans or western formals. Rachana and Umesh, Joshi ajoba's assistant were the only two young people in the attendees. As expected, they had to do a lot of running around. Rachana was struggling with her saree but didn't complain and took a lot of pictures as the pandit put the bride and the groom through the rituals. Akka, Anu and Mai shed tears and assured everyone that they were of joy. Jay's uncle sat next to Joshi Ajoba and watched the ceremony; from time to time mentioning how things were different in the village.

Upendra Date was the only person present who was uncomfortable. Others made an effort to make him feel at ease with limited success. He looked tense and didn't talk much. He did shake hands with Jay when he arrived but he didn't smile. He sat on a chair, closer to the dining table than where the rituals were taking place but paid full attention to the rituals.

When the rituals were over, Jay and Manasi moved around the room, bending in front of the elders and touching their feet. That is when, finally, her father smiled at her and blessed them, "Be happy." He sounded gruff and Manasi wondered if she saw him making effort to control his emotions. He relaxed somewhat during lunch and by end of the meal, he surprised everyone by striking up a conversation with Joshi ajoba.

Her father wanted to arrange a grand reception for them. It would be an occasion to invite close and extended family, friends and all his business acquaintances. After some discussion, it was decided that the reception would be after a month at one of the five star hotels.

When all the guests left, Rachana hung back. When Mai went to lie down in her room Rachana went after Mai and came back a few minutes later with a big smile. Then she looked at Jay and Manasi who were wondering why she had not gone home and said, "Let us go for ice cream!"

Jay looked at Rachana and then at Manasi. Manasi thought he looked surprised, annoyed and also amused. But before he could say anything, his phone rang. He picked it up and looked at the screen before connecting. He listened for a bit and then asked, "Now?" His expression had gone from amused to watchful. "Yes, OK." He said and closed the call.

"Neil Bhargav. Wants to meet me. He has some additional information and some questions. I have agreed to meet him."

Manasi asked, "Is he coming over right away?"

"No. I need to go see him somewhere in Hinjewadi. He is there for some other case, but he wanted to discuss this." He turned to Rachana and smiled, "Sorry sister-in-law. But I need to go for this meeting."

Rachana didn't seem to mind at all. "That is OK," she said casually surprising Manasi and Jay.

As Jay walked towards his room to change Manasi followed, "I'll go with you."

Jay in his jeans and t-shirt didn't look any different than usual. In contrast, Manasi in a pink salwar suit, with mehendi and bangles stood out. She got quite a few looks as they sat at a table in a five star hotel where they were meeting Neil. When he arrived, he shook hands with Jay and then with Manasi, "Attending a wedding?" He asked her casually.

She smiled, gave a quick look to Jay and replied blandly, "Wedding was in the morning."

Pulling back a chair, Neil sat down, "Didn't wear a saree? Ishani lives in jeans but never wears anything but fancy silk sarees for weddings. Any wedding." He smiled and picked up the glass of water.

"Manasi wore a saree for the wedding," Jay said before Manasi could reply. "I don't know if she wears one for every wedding, but for her own wedding she wore a saree."

Neil sat up and looked at Manasi, "You got married this morning?" Confusion was written all over his face.

"We got married this morning," Jay replied with a smile. He also clarified, "To each other."

"What? Oh!" Neil looked nonplussed. Manasi showed him her mangalsutra. He smiled broadly, "Congratulations!"

They ordered coffee and before getting to the discussion about Prakash, he looked at Manasi apologetically and said, “I am sorry to drag you two out on your wedding day. And come to think of it, this is not urgent.” He turned to Jay, “Since I was here in Pune, I thought we should catch up. If you had told me on the phone, I would not have insisted we meet...”

Then the conversation turned to Prakash and the effort that was going on to find him. The appeal in the news papers had not been a success and Neil’s people had gone back to follow up the track from the temple where Prakash had stayed when he ran from home. Neil spread a map on the table. “This is Hatmali. And this is where the temple is, where he had stayed. So we were looking further from the temple, but didn’t find a trace.” He pointed to another place on the map, on the other side of the village from the temple. “In this village, we met an old doctor, who said he had treated a boy of about ten, who was part of a group of Sadhus. He is not sure now, but it could possibly have been the boy in the photo.”

Jay looked at the map carefully and then said, “This place is on the route to where my uncle used to live when we were small.”

Neil looked at Jay, “May be that is where he was headed then?”

Jay shook his head, “But he didn’t go to my uncle’s place.”

Neil sat back and said, “I think, we can work with the assumption now that he did join a group of Sadhus. The current priest didn’t know, but he said he will try to find if there was a certain sect that was moving about in that region around that time.”

When they got home, Rachana was on the porch of the house. She walked inside with them and pulled Manasi to Jay’s bedroom. Jay walked behind the two full of curiosity. “Ta da!” Rachana said, pointing to the decorated room. “My wedding present to you!”. Rachana had brought in decorators to decorate the bedroom and the double bed with flowers quite like in the Hindi movies.

Manasi and Jay stared at the decoration, the bed and then at each other. Manasi saw a smile start in Jay’s eyes and she giggled shaking her head. Then she hugged her sister, “You idiot!”

Rachana hugged her back, looked at Jay and said, “Well, since you two had enough twists and turns and melodrama in your love story, I thought I would give it the right, filmy finishing touch!”

Before going on their honeymoon, they were driving with Mai and Baban Mama to his village and spending couple of days there. Jay hired a SUV with a driver and they set out on the road trip. By now, Baban mama had gotten comfortable with Manasi and also understood well that his nephew would not tolerate a single word against her. As they got close to the village he turned to Manasi and said, "Our village was thirty kilometre away from where it is now. But we all were relocated when they build the new dam. We had protested. We didn't want to move. But who listens to us poor people?"

Jay smiled, "Mama, but you got good houses in the process and land to cultivate. The dam has also helped in the long run."

Mama looked at Jay and snorted, "You have become a real rich person Deepu! Now you are telling us poor people what is good for us! Just like the government."

Jay didn't argue. In fact quite uncharacteristically, he put his arm around his uncle's shoulder and said, "No Mama. I am sure it was a lot of pain to move. Setting up the new village must have been a lot of work too." That pacified Mama and he talked about the troubles they had when they had to leave everything and move.

A year after Jay had taken up the Microsoft job and went abroad, Mai who had been in Pune moved to Adol. She lived with Baban Mama till Jay bought land and built her a small house close to Baban Mama's house. Hers was one of the few properly built houses in the village. Manasi and Jay stayed with Mai in that house but spent a lot of time at Mama's house, along with Mai. It was small house with walls of clay and floor made of clay and cow dung. There was only an Indian style toilet and that was at some distance from the house. Baban Mama, his elder son and Jay were out in the court yard most of the time. Manasi spent a lot of time inside the house with Mami, her daughter and Mai. It was all very new to Manasi. She got uncomfortable from time to time and wanted to go look for Jay, but she forced herself to stay put. Mami was eager to please Manasi and at the same time, find fault with her as Mai's daughter-in-law.

In the early evening Mai asked Jay to take Manasi around the village and show her the temple. As they walked towards the temple, Jay started the conversation with, "I am really sorry. I know you must be really uncomfortable but I wanted you to see and experience this life. This is where I come from."

That one sentence, said with so much sincerity, melted all her annoyance. She smiled at him, “It is alright. I am glad we came here.”

As they walked around the small village and then went into the temple, people stared at them. Manasi was wearing a simple salwar suit, but compared to what the women in the village wore, it looked new and quite fancy. Jay, in his jeans and t-shirt should have looked conspicuous, but he seemed so comfortable in the environment, that he somehow seemed to fit in. After about an hour, when they returned to Mama’s home, both of them had smiles on their faces, which stopped mami in her tracks. She looked at Jay and put her bent hands, on both sides of her head, knuckles touching temples and murmured, “Let not an evil eye ever be cast at you!”

Manasi made a sincere effort to fit in and not let the environment bother her. She understood that hardship was an integral part of village life. When she had returned from the US, even the life in Pune, which is what she had known till she went to the US, had not seemed very easy. But that life in Pune felt like sheer luxury compared to what she saw in the village. So many things that she took for granted in the city were unheard of and unthinkable for people here. There were a lot of things that she felt could be changed in the village to improve what women had to go through and decided to talk to Jay about that.

Next day, before Jay and Manasi were to leave, Mai said, “Deepu, I think you should build a house in Pune. Think about it!” When Jay didn’t say anything she also added, “Once Viju’s wedding is over, I would like to come to Pune. And the bungalow you have rented is nice but it is not your own. I would now like to live in my son’s own house.” Jay almost said that he had a house in the US, where he had taken Mai to live with him. And she had asked him to bring her back! But that, he knew would be rather unfair. After all, he had seen how uncomfortable she had been in the US.

Manasi and Jay were both quiet when they left, both lost in their own thoughts. Manasi felt a little guilty that she was relieved to be heading back. Jay was thinking of what Mai had said. Running AccellaFab remotely had turned out to be a lot easier than he had imagined and Danny had managed to shoulder the responsibilities at the headquarter quite well. His recent visit had

proved that to him. He could live in Pune and visit the head office every quarter or so. But as he thought about AccellaFab's office and the route he liked to take from home to work, his big house and the boat, and cars that he loved, he missed all of that terribly. He wanted to go back.

"Do you want to think about buying land near Pune?" Manasi's words brought him back to present.

He looked at his new wife and put his thoughts aside. There were a lot of things to take care of. The search for Prakash. NDS. On the day of the wedding, while leaving, Manasi's father had told her that he was not going to accept her resignation. That he wanted her back at the helm, heading the place, whenever she was ready to go back to work. He had also said he hoped that she would not leave it for too long. "A company can't run itself", he had told her. Jay knew that Manasi looked forward to going back to work and running NDS.

So for the time being, he would need to be here in India. Should he think about buying some land? Building a house in Pune? If nothing else it could be good investment. If he had a house of his own in Pune, Mai would come over and stay with them more happily!

"Jay?" Manasi prompted when he didn't respond at all.

He turned to look at her and smiled, "Manu, what do you think? Should we look to buy land and build a house in Pune?"

They made their way to Mumbai to catch the flight. Jay was taking Manasi to Switzerland for the honeymoon. After he collected her passport and found out that she had a valid Schengen visa, he had asked her once again if she had any preferences. When she said she was happy to leave it entirely to him, he had asked his admin assistant in the US to take care of the travel and stay arrangements. Both of them agreed on avoiding the typical touristy places and big cities. So they were going to Verbier, a place famous for skiing. Manasi had done a little bit of skiing, like most people who spent a few years in Puget Sound probably did, but Jay was an expert. He had skied in the US, Canada as well as Europe.

When he had talked enthusiastically about the slopes at Verbier, Manasi had asked with some misgivings, "Are you looking forward to spending a lot of time on the slopes?"

He had looked at her with twinkling eyes and then grinned before

explaining his reasoning, “I hope not to have to. But if my amorous attentions become too much for you, it would be good to have something else for me to do!”

This was the first time Manasi was flying first class. Her father didn’t believe in flying first class, in fact he looked at it as waste of money. As a result, even though she had traveled outside India with her parents even before she went to the US, she had never flown first class. So when they boarded, she spent time looking around curiously and then settled down. When they made their way to Verbier in a rented Audi, Manasi looked around at the beautiful landscape mesmerised. At Verbier Jay had booked a suite for them in one the best chalet hotels.

When they checked in, as Jay walked to the door behind the bell boy who had brought in their luggage Manasi looked around at the suite they were in. Big and airy with huge French windows so as to be able to enjoy the view of the mountainous landscape, the suite was extravagantly luxurious.

Flying first class, renting an Audi for the duration of their stay and the ultra-luxurious chalet hotel gave her glimpses of Jay’s lifestyle. The village life in Adol had been characterised by insufficiencies and this was the other extreme; the epitome of luxury. Manasi couldn’t help marvel at Jay for being equally at ease in Verbier, enjoying the riches as he was in the village in midst of a frugal lifestyle. In Pune, he behaved and lived like a typical Maharastrian higher middle class person, neither giving any inkling to where he had come from, the life of constant struggle and almost poverty, nor to the kind of life of luxury that he must be living in the US. For the first time, Manasi could really understand how far he had come from his origin. The success he had achieved was beyond what could have been imagined by any one. Manasi couldn’t help admiring him for his material achievements. But she admired him equally for the ease with which he fitted himself in different settings and lifestyles. She would definitely talk to him about it and hopefully she could learn from him. She had felt uncomfortable in the village; like she didn’t fit in. And she felt somewhat similar in Verbier.

But when Jay locked the door of the suite and picked up a bottle of champagne from the ice bucket on the sideboard before coming over to her with a smile, she kept those thoughts aside, kept the talk for another day. She smiled and put her hand in his outstretched hand. He pulled her close and



gave her a quick kiss before pulling her down on the sofa.

They made love at night and during the days; in the bed and sometimes in front of the blazing wood fire, even in the bathtub and shower. Manasi discovered an enthralling world of sensual pleasure and primitive splendour in Jay's arms. At times, he would linger over her endlessly, bestowing every exquisite sensation on her senses, prolonging their climax till Manasi begged him for the release. At other times, he was in a hurry to take her as if he had no control over his passion. Manasi loved it when he unleashed his skills on her and drove her mad. But she also loved it when he seemed to lose control and race for the release. She discovered that amongst Jay's many skills that she truly admired, lovemaking was definitely one. She also wondered about how he had acquired those skills and remembered the gossip she had heard about him dating many women. She did worry if she would even be enough for a man like him, but only briefly.

They hiked a little, swam in the fancy pool at the hotel once and even made it up on the slopes once. They visited the fancy restaurants a few times but chose to eat in their suite more often. And they talked.

Manasi told him about her childhood, about the time she had feared for her mother's life, about being scared of her father, about enjoying the freedom in the US, not wanting to come back but then deciding to, for her mother and grandmother. And now being sure that this is where she belonged.

Jay told her about his father, about how he had looked up to him, had wanted to be like him and about feeling like everything was over when he died; about feeling lost in Pune when he first came over, then about Mai. And Joshi kaka. About two women he had thought about marrying before her, and also about dating innumerable women but not wanting any lasting relationship, "Till I accepted that I didn't just care about you as a friend, that I loved you and will always love you, the thought of marriage hadn't crossed my mind. When I finally accepted to myself that I wanted you as a lover, as my wife, I was miserable, thinking I could never have that. That's why I made that trip to the US, thinking that if you were far away and I didn't have to see you everyday, it would get easier. In Redmond, I even went on couple of dates with the thought of taking the women to bed, but I couldn't. It was almost a relief to come back." They were in the bed and Manasi's head was

resting on his chest. He hugged her tightly and said, "I am so glad, you came over, demanding to know if I was taking over NDS." Lifting her head, Manasi looked at him, noticed his earnest expression and then started making love to him, using what she had learnt from him, her worries about if she would be enough for him vanishing.

She didn't ask him anything about the women he dated and didn't ask more information about the two women he had thought about marrying. But she did ask about one woman that she was really curious about, "Who is Bindu?"

From Jay's smile Manasi understood that he was thinking about Bindu with fondness, "She is a dear friend. When I joined Microsoft she was a senior developer there and soon understood how I struggled to fit in. She then became a guide who helped me learn a lot of things." He turned and looked at Manasi, "She, her husband and her daughter were like my family in the US. I would love to introduce you two, I am sure you will like her a lot!"

Manasi smiled in response and moved in closer so she could rest her head on his shoulder.

Jay talked about going back to Hatmali for the first time, "Everything seemed so different", Jay murmured. He had his head in Manasi's lap and Manasi was running her fingers through his hair gently. "I went to see our old house behind the school." He looked up at her and captured one of her hands before continuing, "Some people recognised me. That was quite surprising." He told her how one of the teachers at his old school in the village was his classmate from the same school. "I have agreed to setup a library in the village right away. And a computer lab in the school. They also want me to think about a grant to start a high school in the village." Then he got very quiet. Manasi continued running her fingers through his hair, thinking about how in all that he had achieved, in some way he had also lost part of himself. He had lost connect with his roots in a way. He had lost the comfort of a simple environment, being surrounded by childhood friends. Did he ever think he had paid a high price for what he had achieved?

He also talked about Prakash and told her some anecdotes about him. He ended up shedding tears that had accumulated over years. Manasi knew then, that it wasn't only Mai who hoped to find Prakash. That though he didn't

agree, her husband too was obsessed about finding his brother.

Their time in Verbier was time of discovery and learning. Learning about each other in every way possible; discovering each other's likes & dislikes, exploring each other's minds and bodies.

After eight glorious days in Verbier, they went to Zurich where Jay had meetings for two days with different manufacturers. Manasi spent the first of those two days by herself going around the city. She went to the museum and wished Jay was with her to look at the beautiful paintings by Monet. She walked around the Opera house and dreamed of attending a concert there with Jay. She walked around the city and missed having Jay by her side. As a result, when Jay got back from his meetings, Manasi was already at their hotel, waiting for him. As soon as he entered, she rushed to put her arms around his neck and say, "I missed you today!" Jay smiled with pleasure and wrapped his arms around her.

Next day, Jay asked Manasi if she would like to join the meetings that day. Manasi was pleased to be included and accepted the invitation. She sat through the two meetings listening attentively and getting to learn about the respect Jay commanded from the top manufacturers.

In Zurich, they also had their first fight. "Argument!" Jay called it. It was about shopping. Jay told her that no one expected her to go shopping on her honeymoon and that she didn't have to buy gifts for everyone at home. "I am not buying because they expect it! I want to!"

They did go shopping and Manasi did buy gifts for all. And Jay bought fancy lingerie for Manasi. So on returning to the hotel they had another argument about whether the lingerie was a gift for Manasi or Jay had really bought it because he wanted to see Manasi dressed in that, so it was really like he was buying a gift for himself. Both of them were laughing when Jay proceeded to demonstrate the way he liked to see her dressed, in nothing.

Manasi was almost sad to be boarding the return flight but she was also eager to return to NDS.

## Epilogue

Monday after their return from Switzerland, Manasi entered NDS premises with Jay, after a gap of four weeks. During her absence, even during their honeymoon, people had reached out to her on phone and email with various issues and questions. She had listened to them, given them direction wherever needed and taken decisions that could not wait till her return. Jay had looked at her with admiration as she handled issues on phone and had always been there to discuss any particular points that she needed to discuss.

At NDS, everyone from the security guard, the receptionist and the office boys, all welcomed them with big smiles and rushed to congratulate them. When, Manasi and Jay reached her cabin after shaking hands with multiple people and facing a lot of good natured jokes and jibes, Jay looked at the coffee maker and said, “I would love a cup of coffee!” Manasi smiled and as she went about making it, he smiled and told her, “I really loved coming over for coffee to your cabin and just sitting and chatting with you. Those times used to be best part of my days.”

Manasi smiled, “I enjoyed those times too!” Then realizing he had used the past tense, she went ahead, “Why do you say they used to be? You don’t plan to have coffee with me now that we are married?” She teased him.

Jay had a twinkle in his eyes when he said, “Best part of my days before we started making love.”

Manasi blushed and Jay chuckled looking at her. She found herself thinking about the night before. Then about getting ready in the morning, which had taken a lot longer than it should have. She longed to go home and be in Jay’s arms but she had to work! It would be hours before they could leave.

She placed a cup in front of Jay and sat down with hers.

“Manu?” she finally stopped avoiding his eyes and looked up. He reached out to capture her hand on the table and said, “Today is going to be too long a day.”

“Yes,” She was glad he felt the same.

There were a lot of things needing her attention and soon she got busy in

going over things and meetings. They had a quick lunch with Vikram and right after that, focused on work again. It turned out to be a long day and they were able to leave for home in the evening only after eight. As Jay drove through the traffic, Manasi talked about some of the things she had dealt with during the day and closed with, "I think working with Ritu on streamlining the HR function and then Mayank's projects are going to be my priorities."

Jay gave her a quick absent minded smile and turned his attention back to the slow moving traffic. After a couple of minutes, Manasi asked him, "Does it bother you to have to drive in this kind of traffic?"

Jay shook his head, "It is not pleasurable, but it doesn't bother me as such." He stopped the car as the signal turned to red and then gave her his full attention, knowing that they had to wait at least for a few minutes now.

"Are you planning to make a trip to the US again?" Manasi asked him.

"Not right away. When I go, I would like you to travel with me, meet people there, get to know my life there. So when we go, I would want it to be for couple of weeks at least." Manasi was happy to hear that. While she wanted to live in India, she would love to visit Seattle and the Puget Sound and she really wanted to get to know about Jay's life there. She was thinking about it when Jay went ahead to say, "My priorities right now are getting the products for Indian market off the ground, buying or building a house here in Pune and the search for Prakash."

Jay had talked to Neil twice after the meeting on their wedding day, but so far Neil and his team didn't have any more news or information. In her heart she knew that while Jay was keen to launch the product for Indian market and he did want to buy land in Pune to build a house, something that he had talked about couple of times, what he really wanted to focus on was the search. That more than anything else, he wanted to find his brother.

"I am sure we will be able to find him!" Manasi said. She had avoided saying it so far thinking that there was very little hope of that happening. But somehow now, she felt extremely hopeful about finding Prakash and making him a part of their family. Jay looked at her and smiled as if her statement pleased him a lot.

With Jay by her said, Manasi was looking forward to a future of joyous togetherness with a lot of hope.